MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

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MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF

"MY FRIEND JIM," MAJOR AND MINOR," "LA BELLE AMERICAINE," "MATRIMONY,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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MISADVENTURE

CHAPTER I.

MORTON SCANDALIZES HIS HOST

It was well for Morton Bligh's peace of mind, and well also for the comfort of those with whom he was brought into contact in London, that he was ignorant of the terrible things which had been taking place at the Priory during his absence. He felt little or no anxiety upon the point; being persuaded, for one thing, that Mark Chetwode had produced an impression upon his sister, and, for another, that Archie had not utilized his opportunities as he might have done.

"To get on the blind side of the governor," soliloquized Morton, as he sat in the train which was bearing him southwards, "one must affect a good deal of bluntness; and that young fool has overdone the modest.

diffident business, I suspect. Anyhow, if Cicely refuses him, he's out of it; the governor won't disinherit both his children, that's certain."

And very agreeable it was to Morton to reflect that it would now no longer be necessary for him to mount guard so vigilantly at the Priory. If there was one thing more abhorrent to him than another it was rusticity; and he would have cared little enough about his birthright if drawing the revenues arising from the Bligh estates had implied residence upon the spot. He was never really comfortable out of London, where, although, as has been said, a good many people declined to have anything to do with him, he had still a sufficiency of friends, who may have been less particular or may have thought that his moral character concerned them less than his ability to provide them with capital dinners.

"I shall keep coming and going; that will be the best plan," he mused. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken, Chetwode has swallowed the bait; he can't want much spurring on or backing up. Still one ought to be upon the spot from time to time, if only for the sake of appearances. It's a bore, but it's better than having to spend weeks at a stretch in that God-forsaken hole; and

I daresay it won't last long. Those good folks may console themselves with the thought that they'll see no more of me than I can help after my revered predecessor has been laid to rest in the family vault. Once let me get possession, and they may all go to the deuce together for anything that I shall care. Cicely will have my full consent to marry whom she pleases then, and if she chooses Archie in preference to Chetwode I shall be most happy to escort her to church and give her away. I rejoice in promoting the welfare of my fellow-creatures, so long as it doesn't interfere with my own."

Revolving these and other sentiments, not less handsome and liberal, in his mind, Morton reached the end of his journey homewards in very good humour. In obedience to his instructions, a carriage had been sent from the Priory to meet him, and he was at once driven to Upton Chetwode, where he was received by Mark's French valet. That urbane personage, apologizing for his master, who had not yet come in, conducted Morton to one of the spacious, dismal bedrooms, unpacked his dress-clothes for him, and retired with the remark that dinner would be served in half an hour precisely.

"The fellow speaks as if one of the cook's exquisite *plats* might be spoilt by being kept waiting," thought

Morton, with some amusement. "I don't suppose there'll be much to spoil. What a nuisance it must be to be as badly off as Chetwode! However, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and his poverty makes him handy just at present. He ought to be uncommonly grateful to me for giving him such a chance of making a first-rate alliance."

But when he went downstairs to the drawing-room, where his host was awaiting him, he could detect no signs of gratitude nor even of pleasure upon that gentleman's face. Mark, as he held out his hand, said, "I am glad to see you," but he did not look glad; he looked bored and worried, and responded somewhat chillingly to the other's boisterous cordiality.

Almost the first thing that Morton said was:

"Well, thank goodness, we've seen the last of our friend Archie for some time to come. I suppose you've heard that he has gone back to his regiment?"

Mark looked at the speaker with a faint ironical smile.

"Yes," he answered. "I heard that your cousin was to leave to-day. That is good news, isn't it?"

"Well, I consider it so," answered Morton. "And," he added with a knowing glance, "I should think you would too."

But Mark did not choose to understand this delicate allusion. He raised his eyebrows slightly and said:

"Oh, your cousin did not interfere with me in any way. I seldom met him, and had not your reasons for disliking him."

Morton, who was a good deal afraid of the man whom he hoped to make his accomplice, did not venture to pursue the subject farther, and presently they adjourned to the dining-room, where, to the great surprise of the guest, a very cleverly cooked little dinner was set before them. After a time Morton could no longer refrain from commenting upon the phenomenon.

"Where the deuce did you get your cook from, Chetwode? Not from Abbotsport, or anywhere near it, I'll be bound."

"Well, no," answered Mark. "My cook—or at least the person who has been so kind as to cook for us to-night—hails from Paris. For the credit of the house he doesn't mind exercising his skill when I have a guest; but he won't cook for me, and when I am alone I am at the mercy of an aged native who can just manage a mutton-chop and no more. Fortunately, I don't care much what I eat or drink."

Morton, who cared a very great deal, thought it still more fortunate that the establishment included an intermittent culinary artist. He did full justice to each dish in turn, and also thoroughly appreciated the wine, which, for many years past, had been maturing in a locked-up cellar; so that by the time he had been provided with black coffee and a cigarette he saw the world and all that therein is through a beautiful rose-coloured haze. And now it was that Mark, who during dinner had spoken little, had drunk less, and had scarcely eaten at all, judged it appropriate to make a communication which motives of hospitality and charity had thus far induced him to withhold.

"I am afraid, my dear Bligh," said he, "that I am going to tell you something which will not exactly delight you. From all that you have been saying, I presume that you have not yet heard the news of your sister's engagement to your cousin."

"What!" exclaimed Morton, starting so violently that he spilt the half of his coffee. "Oh, I see—you're chaffing. You wouldn't take it quite so coolly as that if it were true."

"Why should I not take it coolly?" asked Mark. "At all events, it is perfectly true."

"I don't believe it!" Morton declared. "If you aren't humbugging me, somebody has been humbugging you."

"Possibly; but I think not. My informant was Mrs. Lowndes, whom I met this afternoon, and who had received her information from Miss Skipwith. According to Miss Skipwith, the engagement is not to be publicly announced just yet, but the family have no wish to keep it secret from their friends. Mr. Bligh is said to be very much pleased about it."

That seemed terribly circumstantial. Morton's incredulity gave place to a sudden gust of fury, and he burst forth into language respecting his father which cannot be reported here.

"Pleased!" he exclaimed. "I should rather think he would be pleased! Why, he has been moving heaven and earth to bring about this accursed marriage! It sha'n't take place though. I'll stop it—we must stop it! Dash it all, man, why do you sit grinning there, as if it were a good joke! Don't you understand that *everything* depends upon our putting a stop to this at once?"

Mark surveyed his angry questioner with unconcealed contempt and disgust.

"I quite understand," he answered, coldly, "that your prospect of becoming your father's heir depends in all probability upon your power to break off a match which he seems to have arranged. Cursing, however, will hardly help you. Might I request you, as a personal favour, not to do it any more? It may be prejudice on my part, but it is extremely disagreeable to me to hear a man cursing his father—especially when he uses such very coarse forms of malediction."

"My father hates me, and I hate him," returned Morton, sullenly; "we have different ways of expressing our hatred, that's all. I'm sorry I shocked your sense of propriety; but you must allow that I have had great provocation. It's enough to put any man's back up to have such a dirty trick played upon him."

"Oh, it's provoking for you, no doubt."

"And not altogether pleasant for you either, I imagine. Come, Chetwode, I think you and I have understood one another pretty well, though we haven't put our thoughts into plain English before. You know why my father wants to marry Cicely to his nephew. He would a great deal rather leave the place to her than to me, but he doesn't like to leave it to anybody but a Bligh. Consequently he had to provide her with a

husband of that name. Of course, in self-defence, I had to try and find her a husband with some other name——"

"And you did me the great honour to select me. I was duly sensible of it."

"I don't know why you should take up that tone, Chetwode. My feeling to you has always been a most friendly one, I'm sure. I thought that if Cicely married you she would marry a gentleman and a good fellow; and the advantage wouldn't have been all on one side, for, as I believe I told you, she will come into at least fifty thousand pounds at her father's death. Moreover, it appeared to me that you were very willing to lend yourself to the plan."

"That may be."

"And if I were not afraid of offending you, I would make so bold as to say that you were becoming rather—er—fond of my sister, apart from any consideration of money."

"You do not offend me by saying so."

"Well, then, my dear fellow, surely you are not going to be such a—I mean, you surely won't give up the game before it is lost! You're altogether mistaken if you imagine she has lost her heart to that long-legged

donkey. She has been talked into this, and she can be talked out of it again. Not by me, I admit, because she shares the family affection for me; but if you can't accomplish that much you're not the man I take you for. Archie hasn't got an extension of leave, I suppose, has he?"

"No; he was to return to his regiment to-day, I understood."

"The field is clear, then: all that you have to do is to cut him out with Cicely, which, I should say, is well within your capacity. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can with the governor. When all's said and done, he has a conscience, or flatters himself that he has. And then, I daresay, by raking about a little, I might be able to furnish him with an awkward story or two about his precious nephew. A man doesn't knock about a garrison town long without getting into a scrape of *some* sort or kind, you may be sure."

Perhaps it was only this last phrase which saved Mark from yielding to the voice of the tempter and entering into a discreditable compact. During the first part of Morton's speech his eyes had brightened; after which he had turned them away and gazed pensively at his neat little shoes. But if his code of honour was

hardly that of an ordinary English gentleman, it was not wide enough to admit association with such a pitiable sneak as Morton Bligh. Therefore he only said:

"You are very flattering, but I am afraid you must not count on my assistance."

"Why not?" asked Morton, sharply.

"For various reasons, with which I won't trouble you; because I should despair of making you understand them."

"The long and short of it is, then, that you mean to leave me in the lurch."

"If you like to call it so."

"Hum! Well, you're a nice sort of friend, I must say!"

For the first time that evening Mark laughed outright.

"You honour me very much when you describe me as your friend," said he, "and I would not for the world appear ungracious or ungrateful. Still I can't resist asking you whether you really were under the impression that I should pay my addresses to your sister for love of you?"

Morton made no reply. A liqueur decanter of cognac

had been brought in with the coffee, and to this he had been devoting himself assiduously during the last few minutes. That was a kind of indulgence which he could never permit himself with impunity, so that by this time his ideas had lost all distinctness of outline. One thing only was quite clear to him: by hook or by crook, his sister must be prevented from marrying Archie.

"I'll clear that fellow out of my path somehow," he declared resolutely, after his host had been waiting a long time for him to speak.

"I am sure it would be wise on your part to do so," answered Mark, who began to find the man rather amusing, and had got over a strong desire to kick him out of the house; "the only question is how are you to do it? In this over-civilized country one can't assassinate one's enemies, or even get them assassinated."

But Morton was very bold, and said:

"If I had him here now he shouldn't leave this room alive, I can tell you!" Whereat Mark laughed again.

For a time it was a little diverting to listen to the vapourings of this half-tipsy fool; but when these degenerated into mere impotent blasphemy Mark grew

disgusted once more, and out of sheer weariness began to take Archie's part.

"I really don't see why you should feel so much animosity against him," he said at length. "He appears to me to be a very commonplace, honest sort of a young man, and quite genuinely in love with his cousin."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" snarled Morton. "That's all you know about him. Commonplace he may be, but I'll be shot if he is honest! Anybody, except the governor, who didn't choose to see, would have seen what his game was all along. Why, even old Aunt Susan saw it! I'm not beat yet, though, I can tell him. He shall live to regret having stolen a march upon me!"

And so forth, and so forth, for the best part of another quarter of an hour. Morton showed no disposition to move, nor was it possible to get him to talk about anything save the one all-important subject. The longest lane, however, has a turning, and when the liqueur decanter had been drained to its last drop, Morton rose, steadying himself by the table, and said he supposed it was about time to order the brougham.

Mark rang the bell with alacrity, and then was

revealed the unpleasant circumstance that no brougham was forthcoming. Perhaps the disused stables were not fit for horses to be put up in; perhaps the coachman, having received no orders to wait, may have taken it for granted that Morton proposed to sleep where he dined: or, perhaps (for like the rest of the servants at the Priory he had no love for his future master), he may not have been unwilling to play a trick upon that gentleman. In any case he had driven straight home, and it was now too late to think of sending to Abbotsport for a fly. What was to be done? Mark, of course, could do no less than offer his guest a bed; but he was relieved when the latter, after considering for a while and heaping many injurious epithets upon the coachman, decided that he would walk home.

"Well, it's a beautiful night," said Mark.

It was a beautiful night, and the moonlight made everything so clear that even a man in Morton's condition could see his way as well as if it had been noonday. Whether, even if it had been noonday, it would have been quite safe to let him go home alone was another question; but Mark was so thoroughly sick of him that he felt quite unable to offer his services as an escort. He stood on the steps and watched the departure of the

belated reveller, who really went wonderfully straight, considering all things. Every now and then he stopped and pawed the air in the attempt to ascend an imaginary hill, and once or twice he took great pains to circumnavigate some non-existent obstacle; but he kept on moving in the right direction, and there seemed to be a very fair chance of his reaching his destination eventually.

"And if he tumbles into a ditch and lies there till he dies, nobody will be one penny the worse," reflected Mark. "That, however, will not happen. He is far too obnoxious a member of society to come to an untimely end."

Mark turned away from the door and strolled across the terrace on the south side of the house, where there was a stone balustrade, overgrown with ivy and lichen. Upon this he dropped his elbows, and so stood for a long time, lost in gloomy meditation. The intelligence which inquisitive little Mrs. Lowndes had taken such pleasure in imparting to him had fallen upon him like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. The idea of reconstructing his fallen fortunes by means of a marriage with Cicely Bligh was one which at first he had conplated with little more than languid acquiescence, but

latterly, as we know, his feelings had undergone a change; and then, too, there is all the difference in the world between a desirable thing which you may have for the asking and a thing which you can't possibly have, however much you may desire it. He had, it is true, soon discovered that the siege and capture of Cicely's heart would be a task demanding some skill, labour and patience, but he had looked forward with a good deal of confidence to the result of his operations. He had made the mistake of despising Archie; he had felt convinced that the young man's chance was not worth considering, and now he was bitterly disappointed. And the worst of it was that it was not the loss of her fortune that disappointed him. He tried to persuade himself that it was, and he was in a measure successful, because the prospect of lingering on at Upton Chetwode in extreme poverty was appalling enough, but in the end he had to face the truth, which was anything but welcome to him.

"I love her," he muttered, "and a pretty fool I am for my pains! It is rather late in the day for me to be making myself miserable because a little girl prefers a subaltern with a pair of spurs and a long sword to a middle-aged civilian. Don't little girls always prefer

subalterns to middle-aged civilians? And are their preferences a matter of any importance? Yet—how can one help oneself? It is a malady like other human maladies, and one gets over it in time, as one gets over the others, unless one happens to die of them. But it hurts while it lasts."

He sighed and turned back into the house, where one of Madame Souravieff's bulky letters was lying on his table unopened. He smiled ironically as his eye fell on it, remembering that he had once been deeply in love with Madame Souravieff.

"Come," he said to himself, "there are compensations in every lot; now at least I have escaped the risk of being poisoned or stabbed."

CHAPTER II.

FORTUNA SÆVO LÆTA NEGOTIO

A PECULIAR feature of English railway management, which everybody must have noticed, is that the train is invariably behind its time when one turns up at the station with five minutes to spare, and just as invariably punctual if, by some unusual mischance, one happens to be a minute or two late. Archie, perhaps, was not yet sufficiently advanced in life to have learnt that this is a rule without an exception: at all events, he was not much alarmed when, on consulting his watch, he found he had run things rather fine. The express was due at Abbotsport Road at 10.30; it was now twenty-eight minutes past ten, and he was still nearly a quarter of a mile from the station. However, he set out at a slinging trot, and had the satisfaction of arriving breathless upon the platform just as the tail lamp of the express was disappearing.

"Dear me, sir, you was very nearly in time," said the

porter, commiseratingly. "I've got your luggage labelled, but I didn't like to put it in—not afore I see you, sir."

"What on earth am I to do?" ejaculated Archie. "I'm bound to be at Aldershot to-morrow morning."

"Oh, that'll be all right, sir; there's the 12.15 as'll get you up plenty o' time, though 'tis a slow train."

Well, this was better than having to order a special; still it was a very great nuisance, and the prospect of waiting an hour and three-quarters on a deserted platform was not cheerful. Archie, however, was in so happy a mood that night that he was prepared to accept all ordinary annoyances philosophically, and he did not spend much time in grumbling. Having lighted a cigar, he tried walking up and down the platform for a few minutes; but finding that intolerable, he left the precincts of the station and sauntered across the fields in a seaward direction, congratulating himself upon the mildness and beauty of the night. After all, he had so much to think about that the time did not seem very long. It is a pathetic testimony to the predominant sadness of life that no one ever doubts the reality of his misfortunes, whereas the effect of unexpected happiness is so frequently to shake the

happy mortal's conviction of his own identity. Archie was still in that blissful state of semi-scepticism. A week ago he would have only been too thankful for a word of encouragement from Cicely; that she would accept him at the first time of asking he had never for a moment expected. And now he was going to be married to her! Going to be married very soon, too, perhaps: for although dates had not yet been mentioned, it was evident Mr. Bligh was not in favour of indefinite delay, and that if a home could be found for his daughter near him, he would be willing to let her quit the shelter of his roof. Archie kept repeating to himself that these things could not be, for the pleasure of assuring himself that they were. He did not notice particularly in what direction he was walking, but simply followed his nose, which happened to point due south, and so, after a time, he came perforce to a stand-still; for now he had reached the edge of the cliffs, and was looking down upon a little shingly bay, where the waves broke with a soft swish and a rattle of loose pebbles far beneath him. On his right hand a portion of Abbotsport was distinguishable, and on his left was a belt of trees, towards which the footpath upon which he was standing led.

Now this footpath afforded the most direct means of communication between the Priory and Upton Chetwode, and, as ill luck would have it, it was along this footpath that Morton Bligh was even then wending his homeward way. Archie was disturbed in the midst of a pleasing vision by the sound of uncertain footsteps, and, turning his head to see who it was coming, recognized his cousin, who at the same moment recognized him. Both men stood still and stared. It was no longer possible to avoid a meeting which one of them, at any rate, would gladly have escaped; but as neither of them had been in the least prepared for it, a few instants of silence and hesitation ensued. Morton spoke first.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he asked, in a thick voice.

"Nothing unlawful, I assure you," answered Archie, laughing. "I've managed to miss my train, that's all; so I've got to wander about until past midnight."

Morton paid no heed to this explanation, possibly did not even hear it. He was trembling with rage and excitement, and the torrent of incoherent abuse which he began to pour forth was barely intelligible; but it was evident that he had heard of his sister's engage-

ment, and was even more angry about it than might have been anticipated.

Archie thought it best to let him rave on. He was determined to keep his temper, and, indeed, did not feel at all tempted to lose it. But when Morton proceeded from objurgations to threats, and actually squared up to him in an absurd caricature of a fighting attitude, he said:

"For Heaven's sake don't make such an ass of yourself! Go home and go to bed, like a reasonable being. There wouldn't be the slightest use in my discussing matters with you now, but when you know all about it to-morrow, you will see that you haven't much cause for complaint. At least, I expect so," added Archie, as a saving clause; for it occurred to him that his uncle might not, perhaps, intend to make the provisions of his will known to his heir-apparent.

"I don't know what you expect, but I know what you'll get—and that's a jolly good thrashing!" called out Morton.

Considering the relative strength of the two men, this menace was sufficiently ridiculous; but Morton, nevertheless, attempted to carry it into effect, so that Archie was compelled in self-defence to reduce him to

comparative helplessness by getting behind him and throwing his arms up. In this position the captive kicked out vigorously and the captor's shins suffered a little; but the scuffle could have but one termination.

"I won't hit you again if you'll let me go," gasped out Morton at length.

"Thank you very much," answered Archie, laughing and releasing him. "Now, if you'll take my advice, you'll get home as quickly as you can, and tell them to bring you some seltzer with a dash of brandy in it the first thing in the morning."

Morton turned sullenly away, making no reply. The struggle had partially sobered him, but it had not made him any steadier on his legs, and Archie, who was at first amused by his divagations, began presently to think that these might prove no laughing matter if he persisted in such dangerous proximity to a precipice. He had not the time, and he certainly had not the inclination, to see his cousin home, but he felt bound in common humanity to conduct him a short distance inland. Accordingly, he strode after him and took him by the arm, saying:

"I'll walk a bit of the way with you."

"I don't want your company," returned Morton, roughly.

"If it comes to that, I am not very anxious for yours; but you had better have somebody to look after you for the next two or three hundred yards. You're awfully drunk, you know, and if you were to slip over the edge anywhere hereabouts you would never move again."

He was quite prepared for another torrent of strong language, but, to his surprise, Morton, whose manner had undergone a sudden and complete change, leant heavily upon his arm and thanked him in a very humble tone of voice for his assistance.

"Devilish kind of you, I'm sure, after the way I treated you just now. You're a good fellow, Archie —upon my word you are! Let's be friends!"

"Oh, all right, anything you like," replied Archie, somewhat impatiently. "Come on!" He only wanted to get rid of the wretched creature, and did not take this abrupt tendering of the olive-branch seriously.

"Yes, but you must let me beg your pardon for what I said to you," persisted Morton, as he staggered along. "Quite unjustifiable, I admit. But you'll overlook it, won't you? You'll try to forget it?"

"Certainly; but don't shove me over the cliff in the

meantime, please," answered Archie: for his companion kept on lurching against him, and there was not much room to spare.

Now that he was provided with a prop to lean upon, Morton seemed to have lost all control over his movements, nor was it easy to keep him away from the perilous verge towards which he perversely gravitated at every step.

"I'll tell you what it is," exclaimed Archie, at length; "if you go on like this you'll have me down presently; and if I go down you'll go too. Can you understand that much?"

Had there not happened to be on that spot a jutting ledge upon the face of the cliff, those would beyond all doubt have been Archie Bligh's last words on earth; for hardly were they out of his mouth when Morton, wrenching himself away with a sudden jerk, gave him a push which threw him completely off his balance. For one horrible, sickening instant he gave himself up for lost; the next he was hanging over the abyss, one knee supported by the narrow shelf of chalk which had arrested his fall, while his fingers clutched convulsively at the scanty herbage, by means of which he strove in vain to haul himself up.

Morton, whose pale face, illumined by the moonlight, had an expression of triumphant malignity, stamped upon his hands as he struggled. If the would-be murderer had had nails in his boots he might possibly have achieved his purpose; but he was a small, light man, and he was wearing thin evening shoes. All he could do—and this he did during several interminable seconds—was to prevent his victim from obtaining any hold sufficient to support the weight of over twelve stone. Archie felt that he was in deadly peril; he did not know how far the projection upon which his knee was resting could be trusted, and he feared that his nerve was beginning to fail. At last, with a despairing effort, he seized his assailant's leg, and, throwing his body forward, just—and only just—managed to fall, gasping and panting, upon his face on the firm land.

The instinct of self-preservation impelled him at once to crawl away from the brink, over which his feet were still hanging, and while he was doing so a loud crashing sound rose to his ears from the beach below. That was really all that he knew about it. Even when he sat up, exhausted and bewildered, and could see no sign of Morton, he did not at once realize that in saving his own life he had taken that of his cousin. After-

wards he remembered in a confused sort of way that Morton had been dragged to the ground, and he thought, but was not sure, that he remembered hearing the unfortunate man cry out; but for the moment he was simply dazed and unable to collect his senses. It was only by degrees that the awful truth dawned upon him, bringing out a cold sweat upon his forehead and making him shiver from head to foot. Morton was killed—of that there could not be the slightest doubt, for the cliff over which he had fallen was at least four hundred feet in height—and Archie may be forgiven if in the presence of such a catastrophe his first thought was for himself, and not for the man who had attempted to murder him.

For Morton, indeed, nothing could be done; but the survivor surely had need to keep his wits about him, and to take what action might seem best to secure himself against the risk of a horrible accusation. Poor Archie had not all his wits about him, but he had sense enough to be aware that if he rushed straight off to the Priory, gave the alarm and related the whole truth, he would inevitably live out the rest of his life under a certain cloud of suspicion which nothing could remove. Cicely would believe his story; so would his

uncle; so, perhaps, but not certainly, would most of his friends and neighbours. But some persons there would undoubtedly be who would shake their heads and purse up their lips. That his cousin and he had been upon bad terms was notorious; it would soon be seen how greatly his worldly prospects were improved by Morton's removal; and the circumstance of his having missed his train and walked back to a place where Morton was likely to be encountered would scarcely escape comment. The more Archie thought of it—and he had not much time for thought—the more he shrank from the only straightforward course, and the more he felt tempted to seek safety in flight.

For flight would mean safety, absolute and complete. No suggestion of foul play would be put forward, because Mark Chetwode must have known that Morton had left his house in a state of intoxication, and that a tipsy man should miss his footing and roll over a cliff was in no way surprising. As for himself, it would hardly be supposed that he had wandered so far away from the station; nor in truth would there be any ground for such a supposition. All he had to do was to hurry back, to report himself at Aldershot in due

course, to be as much shocked as other people when the news of the accident reached him, and to treat the events of the last half-hour as though they had never occurred. Was he not morally justified in adopting that plan? Was he not guiltless of his cousin's death?

"He tried his best to kill me," muttered Archie, "and I should have had a right to try and kill him in self-defence. But I didn't try; it was all his own doing, not mine."

Well, he had to make up his mind, for there were not many minutes to spare, and if he missed the train a second time, his fate must necessarily be decided for him. It seems hard to condemn a man placed, through no fault of his own, in so cruel a dilemma, for choosing to make himself safe. Yet he was wrong, and he lived to acknowledge it. Setting the moral aspect of the question aside, it would have been better for him to confess the truth and take all the consequences that might result, than to carry about with him to his grave a secret which he could never dare to impart to any other human being. But at the time he naturally did not realize what the burden of that secret must be. He was horror-struck, but not remorseful (having no

cause for remorse), and as he hastened along the track, which he had lately traversed under such different conditions of feeling, his longing for escape found expression in the words which he kept repeating over and over:

"Nobody will know! Nobody will know!"

CHAPTER III.

"DEATH BY MISADVENTURE"

EARLY in the morning, Mrs. Allspice, the housekeeper at the Priory, had got through her daily task of rousing up heavy-headed housemaids, and was seated in her sanctum adding up accounts, when a tap on the window-pane made her jump.

"Drat the man!" she exclaimed irritably, when she recognized the face of old Coppard; "why can't he go to the back door, instead of stealing upon a body that way, like a thief in the night?" And, throwing open the window, she proceeded to administer the rating which the case appeared to call for.

"You'll excuse me, mum," said Coppard, in his deep, hoarse voice, "but I'm the bearer of bad noos, which had best be for your private hear. As I come along I thinks to myself, 'Mrs. Hallspice, she's a sensible 'oman with a powerful gift of self-control; I'll tell what must be told to Mrs. Hallspice, and keep out of

the way o' them silly gals, as 'ud go screeching all over the place and breakin' things violent 'stead of easy, like they should be broke.' "

Notwithstanding the self-control with which she was credited, Mrs. Allspice pressed her hand to her heart and gasped.

"Mercy upon me!" she ejaculated. "Don't tell me it's Mr. Archie!"

Coppard shook his head but did not relax the solemnity of his expression.

"To the best o' my knowledge and belief, mum, there ain't nothin' amiss with the young gentleman as you speak of," he replied.

"The Lord be praised for that! Step in through the window, then, if the rheumatics 'll let you. You're right about those girls; they're just as inquisitive as they're flighty, and a stronger thing than that I couldn't say."

Coppard having hoisted himself into the room with rather more groaning and wheezing than was absolutely necessary (for he felt that he had a claim on Mrs. Allspice's famous cherry brandy, and he wanted to show her how much he needed it), proceeded to unfold his tale. As this was a very long business indeed, and

was adorned by numerous picturesque digressions, it may perhaps be summarized with advantage. The upshot of it was that, having pulled round to the Pebble Cove soon after daybreak to pick up his crab-pots, he had seen the body of a man lying on the beach, and that, after landing and making a closer inspection, he had discovered, to his horror, that this unfortunate was no other than Mr. Morton Bligh, stone dead, "and so knocked about and smashed as I won't distress your feelings by describing of it, mum." He had at once hastened to Abbotsport and had assembled a party, with whose help he had removed the corpse to the Seven Stars—"where it now lays, mum. For I didn't venture not for to let 'em carry it up to the Priory, mum, till I got instructions. I couldn't feel as it ought to be done, mum—which I daresay you'll understand me."

Mrs. Allspice commended Coppard and gave him the cherry brandy which his soul loved. She was, of course, very much shocked, and said so a great many times; but she was more impressed by the awful suddenness with which the sinner had been "called to his account," than afflicted by his demise. As to the manner in which the accident had come about she felt little doubt. Mr. Morton had been expected home on the previous

evening, but his non-appearance had caused no alarm, because it was known that he was dining at Upton Chetwode, and, as he had his portmanteau with him, it was supposed that he intended sleeping there. Evidently, if he had had such an intention, he must have abandoned it and started to walk home—possibly under circumstances which rendered walking in the neighbourhood of a cliff imprudent. Mrs. Allspice had reason to be aware that the circumstances alluded to not unfrequently presented themselves in Mr. Morton's case after dinner. But now the question was, who was to break the news to the Squire? And to such a question there could, in that house, be only one answer. It was, as Coppard said, "crool 'ard" upon Miss Cicely, but then she had courage enough for anything; "and besides——" added Mrs. Allspice, caressing her double chin meditatively with her finger and thumb, and leaving her sentence unfinished.

The worthy housekeeper probably meant that it would be impossible for Miss Cicely to grieve very deeply over the death of such a brother, but did not like to say so. Presently she sighed and went up to Cicely's bedroom, after telling old Coppard to stay where he was, and left the cherry brandy on the table

—a thing which she never would have done if her mental balance had not been disturbed. When she returned at the end of a quarter of an hour she saw at once how her confidence had been abused, and placed a mental punishment mark against the delinquent's name: but the present occasion not being an appropriate one for letting him know what she thought of him, she contented herself with giving him a stern look, which he did not seem to comprehend, and telling him to go round to the front door, where he would find Miss Cicely, who wished to see him.

Cicely was waiting on the lawn when Coppard emerged from the stable-yard, and she at once moved further away from the house, beckoning to him to follow her.

"I don't want the servants to know that you are here," she said, as he approached; "they would be sure to guess that something was wrong, and I haven't had time to consider yet how papa is to be told. I am afraid it might do him a great deal of harm if he heard it without any preparation, or even if he suspected that a misfortune had happened and didn't know what it was. In whatever way he may learn it, it is certain to make him ill."

Her cheeks were very white, but her voice was steady and her manner composed. Possibly she might have displayed more emotion if she had only had her own feelings to think of; but as it was there was room for nothing in her mind but dread of the effect of a sudden shock upon her father in his present frail condition. She made Coppard repeat all that she had already heard from the housekeeper, but while she seemed to be listening to the details of his prolix narrative she was in reality debating half a dozen ways of softening a blow which could not be softened, and finding objections to them all.

Coppard was still dilating upon the forethought and presence of mind which he had exhibited throughout this melancholy affair when the tall figure of Mr. Lowndes was seen hurrying up the avenue. Cicely advanced to meet him, glad to have found somebody with whom she could take counsel; for although it was not her habit to ask advice or accept it, she sometimes allowed herself to be guided by the Rector, whose sound common sense she appreciated.

"You have heard?" she said, interrogatively.

Mr. Lowndes made a sign of assent.

"I came up at once to see whether I could be of any use. Has your father been told?"

"Not yet; and I don't know how it is to be done. Even if he were quite well he would feel it a great deal more than—than——"

"Well, yes; I am afraid he would," agreed the Rector, who understood what she did not say.

"And he is not as strong as he was a month ago," continued Cicely, the tears suddenly coming into her eyes. "I have not been able to make up my mind to go to him; but I must not put it off any longer. Will you come with me?"

"Wouldn't it be almost better for me to go without you?" suggested Mr. Lowndes. "I'll do just what you wish, but it seems to me that if I undertook the mission I might, in some ways, save both you and him pain."

Cicely assented gratefully. "How kind you are!" she exclaimed. She knew very well that there was nothing in the world more distasteful to this good-humoured, eupeptic man than the performance of duties which are commonly described as painful; but she allowed him, on this occasion, to assume a burden which by rights should have been laid upon her, because

she felt sure that her father would be able to solace himself by speaking his mind freely to his old friend. All the circumstances of Morton's relations with his family had been so unusual that it would be hardly possible for them, in talking about him together, to give expression to their real feelings. So the Rector went into the house, and having ascertained that Mr. Bligh was up and dressed, gave his card, upon which he had scribbled, "I must see you for a few minutes," to the butler to take upstairs. Immediately afterwards he was shown into the presence of the invalid, whom he found lying on a sofa and finishing his breakfast.

"You're very early, and you look very solemn, Lowndes," remarked Mr. Bligh. "Has the church been burnt down? I hope so; because then it may be rebuilt. Heaven forbid that it should ever be restored!"

It often falls to the lot of a country parson to announce evil tidings, and, unless he is abnormally stupid, experience soon teaches him which method of doing so to select in a particular case, out of the very few methods that exist. Mr. Lowndes simply said:

"I have come to tell you that Morton fell over the

cliff on his way back from Upton Chetwode last night, and was killed on the spot."

He was perhaps right in judging that an abrupt shock would do his friend less harm than a process of slow torture, but he was hardly prepared for the agitation against which Mr. Bligh struggled vainly for several minutes; because, to tell the truth, he had not believed that any father could feel a spark of affection for so worthless and undutiful a son.

"I am afraid I have been very clumsy," he said at length, rising and laying his hand on the sick man's shoulder. "I did it for the best."

Mr. Bligh nodded and presently found his voice. In answer to the few questions that he put he was told all that was known about an accident the immediate cause of which it was easy to surmise; but it was a long time before he could talk as Cicely had foreseen that it would be a relief to him to talk.

"I feel like a murderer, Lowndes," he said at length. "I never wished for poor Morton's death, but I did look forward to it as an event not unlikely to happen and not likely to be deplored. Now it has happened sooner than I expected, and I see, as one always does when it is too late to make amends, that I was not fair to him."

"My dear Bligh, that is nonsense. You were not only fair to him but generous. Let us say, if you will, that death wipes out all offences; but so long as a man lives his offences must be remembered and taken into account. As a matter of fact, you forgave Morton's while he was still alive and had every prospect of living for many years."

"Oh, I made him my heir; I should have been conspicuously unfair if I hadn't. But that is not quite what I mean. I never spoke kindly to him, or showed or felt the slightest sympathy for him. I just tolerated him. He was treated like a leper, whom we only admitted amongst us because we were so sure that his leprosy was not catching. It was the wrong way to go to work. One should either forgive without reserve or not at all."

"Most people wouldn't have forgiven him at all," the Rector declared; "and though I wish to be as charitable as I can, I am bound to say that I don't believe kindness would have had any good effect upon him."

"Ah, well! it's useless to discuss the question now. I think Archie ought to come back; no doubt his colonel will give him leave. Perhaps Cicely will write him a line."

"Yes; or for that matter it would be easy enough to telegraph."

"No; I don't want him telegraphed for. If he is here the day after to-morrow that will be quite time enough in my opinion; but Cicely can do as she likes about it. There will have to be an inquest, I suppose?"

"That is unavoidable, I am afraid," answered the Rector; "but it will be a mere matter of form and your presence will not be required."

He remained for some time longer with Mr. Bligh and only took his leave when Cicely, whose anxiety could endure no further delay, came in. Cicely's first impression on seeing her father's face was that a delicate operation had been skilfully performed, and she threw a quick glance of gratitude at her emissary, who nevertheless went away sorrowful.

"I don't like it," thought the good man to himself, as he descended the staircase. "I don't like it a bit. I only hope that this may not be his death-blow; but it wouldn't surprise me if he never rallied. He wasn't in the least like himself from beginning to end—too much moved at first and too apathetic afterwards. One doesn't require a doctor to tell one what that means; the disease is reaching the brain."

Cicely, as was only to be expected, formed a less gloomy prognosis. She could not shut her eyes to the hopeless nature of her father's illness, but she had managed to shut them to the fact that he was growing slowly and steadily worse, and now she managed to ignore symptoms which in the case of any other sick person would not have escaped her. In the afternoon Mark Chetwode called to make inquiries, and she saw him for a few minutes, wishing to hear anything that could be learnt from the last man who was known to have seen Morton alive.

Naturally he did not tell her much. His face, which he could always and without effort render expressionless, concealed any emotion that he may have felt. Only once in the course of the brief interview did a slight change come over it, and that was when, in reply to his request that he might be allowed to be of some use to her, since her father was incapacitated, she said:

"Oh, thank you, but I hope Archie will be here to-morrow or next day. I am going to write to him."

He did not congratulate her upon her engagement, thinking that it would be a breach of good manners to allude to an event which had not yet been formally

made public, and as he had no excuse for lingering where his presence was something of an intrusion, he soon went away in a very despondent mood.

"This closes the chapter, then," thought he. "If my case was hopeless yesterday, it is doubly hopeless to-day. So far as I am concerned, the entire Bligh family died when that miserable creature broke his neck. I only wish I could forget them as easily as I shall be able to forget him!"

As a matter of fact, however, he was not able to forget Morton very readily; for he was reminded of his deceased guest in a disagreeable manner when he was called upon to give evidence at the coroner's inquest. That court of inquiry, which was held at the Seven Stars, treated him with scant consideration, and the reluctance which he evinced in answering certain questions was not appreciated as it might have been. Asked in what condition the deceased had left his house, he began by replying that the deceased had left his house sound in wind and limb. This was considered flippant and evasive, and he was very soon made to confess that during the evening Mr. Morton Bligh had drunk a good deal of wine and spirits.

"Was he sober when he started to walk home?"

"Well, that depends upon what you call sober. He could walk."

"Could he walk straight without assistance?"

"I am not prepared to affirm that he could walk absolutely straight; he appeared to me to keep a relatively straight course."

"And knowing, as you must have known, the danger that lay before him, it did not occur to you to walk with him?"

"It did not. I foresaw no special danger."

These answers created a very bad impression, and at the last of them the jurymen, with one consent, wagged their heads solemnly. They were all Abbotsport men, which is as much as to say that they were acquainted with the physical disabilities under which the deceased had laboured at the time of his demise, and could heartily sympathize with them. It might, they thought (though this, after all, was a moot point), be wrong to get drunk, but as for asking a man to drink with you, and neglecting to see him home after your drink had overpowered him, there could be no two opinions about such conduct as that. Indeed, it was afterwards said that several of them had been strongly in favour of

finding the delinquent guilty of manslaughter, and had only been brought to do violence to their sense of what was right by representations that the man was no better than a foreigner. It was, at all events, a considerable time before they could agree upon a verdict of "Death by Misadventure," to which the following expression of opinion was added:

"The jury desire to record their great astonishment and regret that no reasonable and humane precautions were taken by the gentleman with whom the deceased had been dining to avert a calamity which might have been predicted."

The admirable and well-chosen terms in which this rider was couched were generally considered to reflect great credit upon Mr. Simpkins, the foreman, but old Coppard, who, as may be remembered, had a private grudge against Simpkins, said that, by his way of thinking, the jury would have done better to mind their own business and keep their astonishment and regret to themselves.

"These things comes to pass by the will of the Almighty," was his pious comment. "Drunk or sober, when a man's hour comes he's got to die. Regretted

or not regretted, the young Squire's dead, and I don't see as it'll do him no manner o' good to throw nasty dictionary words at the livin'."

Much the same, though otherwise worded, were the sentiments of Mr. Lowndes, who caught Mark up in the street, and made him a sort of apology.

"Stupid fellows! They had no business to say such things even if they thought them. Bligh will be very much vexed when he hears. I hope you won't let it distress you."

"Distress me! Why should it distress me?" returned Mark. "Is it possible that in England you really care what these boors may say or think about you? At an election time I understand that they may become important, since you have chosen to make them your masters, but even at an election time you must surely be laughing at them, unless you feel the absurdity of the position too much to laugh. As for me, an English peasant is no more to me than a Russian moujik; I should be ashamed of myself if such beings had the power to cause me emotion of any kind."

He spoke with a warmth which left the worthy Rector open-mouthed, and which seemed to betray a

good deal of the emotion which he disclaimed. But in truth the verdict of the coroner's jury had not ruffled him. What he felt, and what had caused him to turn so sharply upon innocent Mr. Lowndes, was blind rage against fate and deep disgust for the scene of his discomfiture. He had now quite made up his mind that he would leave the neighbourhood and never return. He was not so poor but that life—a kind of life—would still be possible for him elsewhere. "Rather a single room in St. Petersburg than a castle in this accursed province!" he muttered, as he strode up the hill towards lonely Upton Chetwode.

CHAPTER IV.

ARCHIE RETURNS

"WHY, Bligh, old man, what have you been doing to yourself? You look as if you had just had a bout of jungle fever!" was the remark with which one of his brother officers greeted Archie when he reached Aldershot.

And the others followed suit. They said it was all very well for him to pretend that he had been leading a quiet life down in the country, but that wouldn't do. "Too much London is your complaint, my boy," declared these knowing fellows; and he only contradicted them in a half-hearted sort of way, being conscious of his haggard appearance and feeling that it must be accounted for somehow or other. He admitted that he was wretchedly seedy, which was in fact the truth, and he added that he didn't know why, which was a somewhat less veracious statement. About his engagement he said not a word; for in this dreadful

misfortune which had overtaken him he could feel certain of nothing. It seemed as if trouble in some shape must come of it—as if the secret which had already, in his mind, raised a barrier between him and the girl whom he loved must keep them apart for ever; though of course there was no reason why it should, so long as he kept his own counsel. There was, too, the possibility—a very remote one, no doubt, but still a possibility—that the truth might be discovered; and all day long he kept thinking of this, remembering how clear the night had been, and how exposed the spot on which the fatal encounter had taken place. A coast-guardsman in the distance might well have seen it all.

Poor Archie had many days of unhappiness before him, but he afterwards thought of that first day as the most unhappy and the most interminable of his whole life. He had a certain amount of duty to do, which filled up a portion of it, but during the remainder he was in a state of almost intolerable suspense and misery, trying most unsuccessfully to be like himself, knowing how necessary it was that he should show no signs of mental distress, and expecting every moment to receive a telegram which never came. There was very little

rest for him that night. Instead of sleeping, he tossed about upon his bed and tormented himself with conjectures. That he would be communicated with as soon as the catastrophe became known he felt certain; he could only suppose that Morton's body had not been found.

But when the newspapers arrived the next morning that surmise was proved to be incorrect. It was the Colonel who handed him a copy of the *Times*, saying: "I'm afraid this must refer to one of your people, Bligh." And there, sure enough, was a paragraph headed—"*Fatal Fall from a Cliff*," in which it was narrated how Morton Bligh, the only son of Mr. Bligh, of the Priory, Abbotsport, had met with his death in a shockingly sudden manner while walking home at night from the house of a neighbour.

"I suppose you would like to go to your uncle? There will be no difficulty about that," said the Colonel, looking kindly at the young fellow, whose evident agitation seemed only natural under the circumstances; and Archie murmured a few words of thanks.

He thought he had better telegraph to the Priory first; but before he had time to do so the second post brought him a letter from Cicely which rendered that

unnecessary. The letter, written apparently in haste and in a somewhat tremulous hand, gave a very brief account of the fatality which had occurred, and begged Archie to ask for leave and return as soon as possible.

"I would have telegraphed for you," Cicely wrote, "but papa did not wish it; he only thought you ought to be here for the funeral. He has been very much upset, as you may imagine, and of course his health has suffered; but I do hope and trust that he will be better in a day or two." Of her own feelings she scarcely spoke: evidently her mind was filled with anxiety for her father and could at present hold no other emotion.

It was with a heavy heart that Archie seated himself in the train that afternoon. He was not a man to whom dissimulation came easily, and in his short, sunny life he had had so very little experience of trouble that he could not put it away from him, as less fortunate people learn perforce to do. The more he thought of it the more impossible it seemed to him that he could meet Cicely's eyes without being detected. How would he ever be able to affect the horror and consternation that would be expected of him? How could he get through the horrible duty of following to the grave the body of the man whom he had killed? It was useless

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to say to himself that he had not really killed Morton, that he had been guilty of no crime. That was true; and if, immediately after the event, he had had the courage to say so openly, he might possibly have been believed; but by evasion he had made himself guilty of the crime—guilty, at any rate, in the eyes of all who might subsequently hear of it, perhaps even of his own. He had chosen to act as a murderer would have acted, and what he had done could never be undone now. So early as this he had reached the point which nothing could have saved him from reaching sooner or later—the point of regretting that he had run away, instead of facing danger. The poor fellow was naturally brave and honest, which made his plight the more pitiable. "Perhaps I shall get accustomed to it," he groaned at last. That was the only consolation which he could offer to himself, and he had not the advantage of being able to believe in it.

At Abbotsport Road another passenger alighted, to whom the footman from the Priory touched his hat. This little grizzle-headed man bustled out of the station in front of Archie and glanced round at him inquiringly, with his foot on the step of the carriage, which was waiting.

"Oh, Mr. Bligh, I think?" said he. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Parsons; I have been sent for to see your uncle."

"I hope that doesn't mean that he is worse," said Archie, to whom the famous physician was well known by repute.

"Well, I hope not," answered Sir Peter, when they had taken their places in the carriage; "but to a man in his state mental disturbance cannot be otherwise than dangerous, and his daughter is frightened about him. Naturally enough, poor girl! This is a sad business!"

"Yes," agreed Archie, trying to say something more, but finding that the words stuck in his throat.

"Yes, a great shock to your uncle, no doubt; although, as of course you know, his son was not all that he could have wished."

"I don't think Morton could be called a good son," Archie managed to say.

Sir Peter shook his head.

"A bad fellow, I'm afraid, if the truth is to be spoken. He made himself notorious in many ways, and none of them pleasant ways. Still when a man loses his only son it comes upon him as a blow, what-

ever the son may have been worth; and there is always something awful about a sudden death, though I daresay most of us would prefer to die suddenly, if we could choose."

After this there was a pause, during which the physician may have been reflecting that the prospects of the young man beside him had probably undergone a great change for the better in consequence of his cousin's death; for his next remark was:

"Your uncle's estates are entailed, I presume?"

"No; he can do what he likes with them," answered Archie; and added, "but I hope that he may enjoy them himself for a long time to come."

"Hope does no harm," said Sir Peter; "I am not going to extinguish Miss Bligh's hopes unless she compels me to do it. But her father is well aware that his disease is incurable, and, if you do not know it, I think it is better that I should tell you so."

"But you don't consider him in immediate danger, do you?" asked Archie.

"I did not when I saw him last: this affair may have hastened what is ordinarily a slow process, though. And so his daughter will get the property, I suppose? Poor child! it isn't an enviable fate to be a great

heiress. And there will be nobody to take care of her except the old aunt, who didn't strike me as a very efficient person."

Archie was very nearly saying that there would be somebody else, but held his peace. He could not shake off the impression that something undefinable had separated him from Cicely, and it was a relief to him to think that their first meeting must take place in the presence of this stranger.

The meeting, in fact, passed off without any painful incident. Cicely greeted him affectionately and seemed to be glad that he had come, but it was plain that she was far less preoccupied with her lover than with Sir Peter Parsons, whom she followed upstairs. Archie went into the library, where he found Miss Skipwith squeezing a damp handkerchief in her trembling fingers. The poor woman, whom Sir Peter was not alone in deeming inefficient, had been completely set on one side for two days, and, having nothing to do, had fretted herself into a state of nervous excitement which made even Archie's company welcome to her.

"Yes," she said in answer to his first question, "I am afraid Wilfrid is worse. From what his servant

told me, he must have had something like a seizure in the night, and though he seemed to have rallied this morning, Cicely was dreadfully alarmed and insisted upon telegraphing for Sir Peter. How terrible it all is! I suppose I am very wicked, but I can't help feeling that Morton has always done everything that could be done to break his father's heart—even in his death."

"His death, at least, was not intentional," observed Archie, with a queer, incongruous inclination to burst out laughing.

"No, but the circumstances which caused it were, and they were so disgraceful, and everybody knows them! There is no doubt that he was intoxicated when he left Upton Chetwode, and I have just heard that the coroner's jury have brought in a verdict reflecting upon Mr. Chetwode for having allowed him to walk away in that state. It is very cruel of them to say such things, I think."

Archie made no reply. Everything appeared to have fallen out in accordance with his anticipations. He was sorry that anything disagreeable should have been said about Mark, but not sure that that gentleman had not deserved it. Ah, if only Morton had been prevented

from starting on that fatal walk! He sat listening half-unconsciously to the lamentations of Miss Skipwith, until the door opened and Cicely came in, looking less anxious than she had done on his arrival.

"Sir Peter has relieved my mind," she said; "I daresay I was too ready to take fright. He says he would like to see you for a minute before he goes," she added, turning to Archie; "you will find him in the hall. He is in a hurry to get back to London and thinks he will just catch the up-train if he starts at once."

Archie went out, and meeting Sir Peter at the foot of the staircase, said:

"I am glad to hear that you could give a favourable report."

But Sir Peter shook his head.

"Well, relatively favourable," he answered. "I think Mr. Bligh has pulled through what might have proved to be the last stage of his illness, and it is very possible that he may now linger on for many months. On the other hand, he may take a turn for the worse at any moment. I found him a good deal depressed, but he told me that his affairs were in order and that he was easy in his mind about his daughter's future—which is a comfort to him." Here the doctor glanced at Archie

and smiled. "You must allow me to congratulate you," he added; "I rejoice for the young lady's sake as well as for yours."

Then he consulted his watch, shook hands hurriedly, and ran out to the carriage.

Archie returned to the library with as cheerful a countenance as he could assume, but found only Miss Skipwith there.

"Cicely begs you to excuse her till to-morrow," the old lady said. "Her father likes to have her near him; and besides, she has borne up so bravely all this time that she is beginning to feel the reaction. Perhaps you will not mind dining alone to-night. I have no appetite, and I think I would rather go to my own room." Miss Skipwith hesitated for a moment, then resumed in a lower voice: "I am afraid there are a good many painful duties which must devolve upon you. The—the remains are to be transferred here to-night, I understand, and no doubt arrangements will have to be made and directions given. Mr. Lowndes kindly offered to help us, but perhaps, now that you have come, we ought not to trouble him."

"I am sure I shall only be too glad to spare Cicely and Uncle Wilfrid in any way that I can," answered

the young man; and in truth he was glad to be provided with occupation, ghastly though that occupation necessarily appeared to him. There was a horrible irony in the fate which compelled him to receive Morton's body and give orders for its burial; yet he dreaded that less than the inevitable conversation with Cicely which he foresaw, and the postponement of which was a respite to him.

Late that night, however, when he had done all that had to be done, and was sitting in the smoking-room with his head on his hands, Cicely stole in for a miuute to thank him.

"You have been very kind and good," said she; "and now, Archie, there is one thing I want to suggest; let us never mention Morton again if we can help it. I didn't love him, nor did you; we can't pretend that we did. But we can be silent about him, and—and remember that it isn't for us to judge him any more now."

"Yes, that will be best," cried the young fellow eagerly, for it seemed to him that he was being offered the nearest approach that could be obtained to that obliteration of the past for which he longed so despairingly—"that will be much the best! We'll—we'll try to forget it all, won't we?"

CHAPTER V.

COPPARD'S CONJECTURES.

It cannot be a very common experience to act as chief mourner to a man who has died by your hand, and certainly it cannot be a very agreeable one. Archie, however, representing his uncle, who was unable to attend the funeral, got through it somehow or other, and his pale face and downcast looks were noticed only with approval. Everybody now knew (because Mrs. Lowndes had taken care to inform everybody) that he was engaged to be married to his cousin, and that consequently he would at no distant date be *de facto*, if not *de jure*, owner of the Bligh estates and the large Bligh fortune; so that if he could contrive to be really sorry for the death of the disreputable person whose removal opened up such a fine future for him, he must be an uncommonly kind-hearted fellow.

Notwithstanding Mr. Bligh's wish that the funeral should be as quiet and simple a ceremony as possible, it

was rendered imposing by a great assemblage of neighbours, whose presence must have been due to some other motive than respect for the deceased. Out of the corner of his eye Archie saw them all, and was distressed by an altogether mistaken idea that they were looking askance at him. After the last words of the solemn service had been read, he had to shake hands with a good many of them, to listen to their conventional expressions of sympathy with his uncle, and to hear each of them in turn exclaim: "Shocking thing!" Sir George Dare, whose countenance was habitually adorned by a broad smile, assumed an of air gravity which was irresistibly comical while uttering the prescribed formula, but allowed his features to relax into their normal set when he whispered in Archie's ear:

"Lucky dog! I've heard all about it. You mustn't mind my saying that I should have preferred somebody else whom I could name to be in you shoes. Wish you joy all the same you know!"

Well, this was comforting and kindly meant, and Mr. Lowndes, who presently issued from the vestry door was even more warm in his felicitations, declaring that the match was one upon which he had long set his heart, and that he knew it would bring great happiness

to others besides the young couple. But in spite of what he had said to Cicely the night before about oblivion, Archie could not free himself from the weight of care which oppressed him, and he was thankful to get back to the Priory and hide himself in the smoking-room and be alone. But he had not been alone five minutes when the butler came in to say that Mr. Bligh wished to see him, and of course he could not disobey the summons.

Mr. Bligh had been moved downstairs and was in the library again. He looked much as usual, Archie thought—perhaps a little feebler—but when he began to speak there was a noticeable change in his voice, and every now and then he seemed to have a certain difficulty of articulation.

He said:

"Well, my dear fellow, this is a sad house to have brought you back to. Among the dead and the dying it is hard to keep up one's spirits. Aldershot would be more tolerable, wouldn't it?"

"I'd rather be here," Archie answered.

"For some reasons I suppose you would. Are those reasons powerful enough to keep you here, do you think?"

He looked almost pleadingly at the young man, who replied in some surprise:

"Of course, I should like to stay as long as they'll let me."

"That would hardly be more than a week, would it? I am going to ask a favour of you, Archie: I want you to send in your papers at once. Of course, you will wish to return to your regiment for a few days and say good-bye to your old friends and so forth, but if you and the authorities could be satisfied with that much I should be glad. You see you are rather badly wanted here, and may at any time be still more wanted. After all, it would be only hastening your retirement by a month or two."

Archie signified his entire willingness to do as he was requested. Any renewal of the old, thoughtless, happy-go-lucky life which he had been used to lead in the regiment would, he felt, be impossible, and assuredly no house which contained Cicely could ever be dull or sad for him.

This latter consideration he mentioned to his uncle, who smiled and said:

"That's as may be. At your age nature demands some outlet for latent energy, and philandering,

though pleasant, doesn't quite meet the want. However, it might be supplied, perhaps, if you were inclined to relieve me of some of the duties that I can't perform any longer. Managing another man's estate is a shade less interesting than managing your own, but it is, and will be, so very nearly your own that I should think you might see to things with almost all the zest of proprietorship." Mr. Bligh was silent for a moment or two before he added: "I cannot quite make up my mind yet whether I will execute a fresh will or not. As matters now stand, Cicely will inherit everything, except the sum which I always intended you to have. Possibly it would be wiser to make you my heir; because authority ought to belong to the husband, not to the wife, generally speaking."

"It would come to exactly the same thing," said Archie.

"Oh, dear, no; it wouldn't come to the same thing at all. But there are advantages and disadvantages in both courses. I must weigh them a little longer, I think. The future, you see," continued Mr. Bligh, musingly, "is always uncertain, and is very seldom what one expects it to be."

Perhaps it was some vague apprehension suggested

by these words, or perhaps it was the extreme repugnance which he felt to the idea of becoming enriched by Morton's death, that made Archie answer hastily:

"I hope you won't dream of disinheriting Cicely in my favour. I don't think she would like it, and I know I should hate it. As for authority, I hope there will never be any question of that between us. Whatever she wishes I am sure to wish; and even if I didn't, I should try to make her think that I did."

Against such youthful and Arcadian notions of matrimonial existence it was hardly worth while to contend. Mr. Bligh, with a half amused, half sad glance at his nephew, only said:

"Well, I take note of your objection. Thank you for giving in to me about your retirement from the army, and also for helping us through these dark days as you have done. Now I think I must dismiss you: I can't talk or listen long without getting confused."

From that time forth Archie's life began to move along the lines which seemed destined to guide it through a long vista of happy years to its close. Those lines, to all outward appearance, were fallen to him in pleasant places, and were, in truth, such as he would have chosen in preference to any others: for he loved

the country, and the kind of work which his uncle now handed over to him was just that which suited his tastes. But the heart knoweth its own bitterness. To talk about forgetting was ridiculous; he might as well have attempted to forget a toothache. He was a changed man, and he knew that he was changed, and he feared that others must know it too. Sometimes Cicely looked at him in a surprised, inquiring way, which tortured him. Did she suspect anything? Would she ever suspect? He brooded over such thoughts until he almost felt as if discovery would be better than suspicion.

In reality, Cicely noticed nothing more than that he was depressed at times, and that did not strike her as surprising. Of course it must be dull for him to be buried down in the country at that season of the year, with two women and an invalid, and of course a house of mourning cannot very well be made cheerful. She thought him very good and uncomplaining, and when she was not with her father (but of late she had been nervously unwilling to leave her father for long) she did her best to amuse him. In that way they had some rides and walks together, which raised his spirits for the time being and increased his adoration for his

betrothed. She never said anything now about not being in love with him; so that he had moments of joyful hope which were perhaps as little justified as his fears.

The latter, however, predominated, and it did not take much to rouse them into full activity. One afternoon, for example, he was terribly scared by certain remarks of old Coppard's, whom he encountered in the main street of Abbotsport, and who stopped to speak to him. Coppard might have been drinking rather more than was good for him, and indeed Archie was pretty sure that he had; but that did not account for the man's disquieting and suggestive manner. For he pulled up in the middle of the street, with his hands in his pockets and his legs very wide apart, as though he did not intend the other to escape him, and fixing a steady, peculiar stare—surely it was a peculiar stare—upon Archie's face, began at once to talk about the recent catastrophe.

"'Twas a cur'ous thing to happen, look at it what way you will, sir," said he. "*I* can't account for it to my satisfaction, nohow. Come to consider the evidence and put this and that together, it do seem strange. Intossicated with liquor I make no doubt he were, poor

gentleman; but then, says I to myself, if a man could keep his legs all that distance, what could ever ha' made him lose 'em in the one spot where he was sartin sure for to kill hisself if he fell? 'Misadwentur,' says the crowner's jury; and no fools they, if they'd ha' stopped at that! Misadwentur is a word as covers a power o' meanin's."

"What meaning do you want to give to it?" asked Archie, turning pale. "Are you suggesting that my cousin committed suicide?"

"I don't suggest nothin' at all, sir," answered Coppard; "I wouldn't make so free. I on'y merely says I can't account for it—not to my own satisfaction. Don't know whether it strikes you as it does me, sir, but by my way o' thinkin' intossication don't explain it."

"The coroner's jury appear to have thought that a sufficient explanation," observed Archie.

"So they do, sir, and nobody can't blame 'em, with the little evidence they had to go upon. But it's like this, do you see, sir? A man is found dead at the bottom of a cliff. How did he come there? Well, you has to take your choice of three ways"—and Coppard solemnly checked them off on the tips of his big, blunt fingers—"there's accident, there's sooicide,

and there's foul play. Now, I've been over the ground up top o' the cliff very careful, and I've seen traces o' what looks to me uncommon like a struggle."

"Why didn't you say so before, then?" asked Archie, who now felt almost sure that Coppard suspected him. "Don't you know that it was your duty to state everything that could throw light upon the affair?"

"Never heerd tell on it, sir," answered Coppard. "My dooty, as I was given to understand, was to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth. Now, I couldn't ha' swore as a struggle had took place. Not by no means. Let alone as I'd sooner perjure myself than I'd distress Miss Cicely. With you 'tis different, sir. The young squire, he worn't your brother, nor yet you and he worn't particular good friends, I b'lieve. Whether he come by his death this way or that don't make no great odds to you."

Archie's throat felt dry and parched. He could not speak, but stood, with knitted brows, gazing at the old fisherman, who presently resumed:

"Beggin' of your pardon, sir, is it true what I've heerd tell—that you and Miss Cicely is to be man and wife?"

"Yes," answered Archie, shortly, "it is true."

"Then I hain't got no more to say, sir. I wouldn't have Miss Cicely worrited, not if 'twas ever so. If it had been only you as was consarned I don't know but what I might ha' spoke my mind more free; but worritin' you will mean worritin' she now, I reckon."

"You'll be good enough to speak your mind here and now," returned Archie, with a sudden rush of anger. "You are making insinuations which I don't understand and won't submit to. Do you accuse me of having caused my cousin's death?"

"Lord save us, sir!" exclaimed Coppard, with uplifted hands, "what an awful thing to say! No, sir; what I was thinkin' of—since you order me to speak out—was this. It come to my hearin' as you missed your train that there night, and was walkin' about the country for a matter of two hours, waitin' for the next one. Now, thinks I, we know from Mr. Chetwode as the haccident occurred most probable betwixt eleven and twelve o'clock, and if so be as there *was* foul play, and that young gentleman was anywhere in the neighbourhood, why, he might ha' seen somebody, or heerd somethin', thinks I."

"I neither heard nor saw anything," answered

Archie, telling this first direct lie with a sickening sense of self-contempt; although, to be sure, it is no worse to tell lies than to act them.

"You did not, sir? Well, so much the better, maybe. We can't bring back the dead, and I shouldn't ha' named this to you, sir—for I see it's put you about—without you'd pressed me to it. Henceforward I shall keep my mouth shut, sir, you may depend."

Archie paused irresolutely. That Coppard had spoken out all that was in his mind he did not believe; yet would it be prudent to push him farther? The man could not *know* anything, could not prove anything. His momentary flash of wrath had expired, and he now once more felt wretched, frightened, degraded, anxious chiefly to close the interview and get away. Should he tip Coppard, or would that look too much like paying hush-money? Finally he decided to say:

"Well, my man, I think you can't do better than keep your mouth shut if you have nothing more than a very doubtful sort of conjecture to bring forward. But, of course, you can do just as you please about it. Here's half-a-crown for you; I wouldn't spend it in drink if I were you."

There was no harm, surely, in so small a donation as that; one doesn't buy secrecy with half-a-crown.

Coppard, at any rate, did not seem to regard it in the light of a bribe. He touched his hat, pocketed the coin and said reproachfully:

"Drink, sir? 'Tis little enough o' that us poor fellows gets! What I shall spend this here on is bread —bread for my missus and the young 'uns, as wants it badly."

"Well, I hope you'll be as good as your word," said Archie, turning away.

When he had time to collect his ideas he perceived that he had been far too easily frightened, and also that if he could not control himself better he would infallibly betray his secret ere long.

"It comes to this," he muttered, "that I must either learn to tell lies without wincing or throw up the sponge at once. Why haven't I got a face like that fellow Chetwode's? The fact is that I can't really be in danger from anybody except myself."

That he had already fallen into one stupid blunder he had been reminded by Coppard's observations; he ought certainly to have mentioned the circumstance of his having missed his train on the night of Morton's

death. Why he had neglected to do so he hardly knew, except that he had shrunk from any allusion to that terrible evening; but he now saw that the omission must be repaired as soon as possible, and he took the first opportunity that offered of saying carelessly to Cicely:

"By the way, I never told you that you were right about my having run things too fine when I left here for Aldershot. I reached the station just in time to see the train go out, and I had to wait for the 12.15."

"Oh, did you? How very tiresome for you!" she exclaimed. "What did you do with yourself all that time?"

"I walked about. It was a fine night, you know."

She gave a little shiver.

"Oh yes; it was *that* night, of course." And then after a pause, during which Archie's heart began to thump: "If only you had walked as far as the Upton Chetwode path! But we won't think about that."

She was in truth quite as desirous of avoiding the subject as he could be, and neither then nor at any subsequent time did it occur to her to put this and that together after the manner of Coppard. Her one great anxiety in those days was to devise some means of raising her father's spirits, which were painfully

depressed, and next to that she wanted to cheer up Archie, who also seemed to be in need of some one to cheer him up. If she was successful in neither case she was scarcely conscious of her failure; for both men loved her so much that the mere fact of seeing her was their greatest pleasure in life, and gave them a fictitious air of light-heartedness while she was near.

Archie, as has been said, was really light-hearted by fits and starts; and as the days grew longer and warmer, and summer set in in earnest, he began—without knowing it perhaps—to derive that sort of enjoyment from existence which sunshine and the voices of Nature bring to those whose minds are ill at ease. When a man of his age longs above all things for peace it may be assumed that he is in a bad way; but at any rate no place could be better adapted than Abbotsport for the satisfaction of such longings. After a time he went for a day or two to Aldershot, as his uncle had suggested that he should do, took leave of his old comrades, made the usual valedictory addition to the regimental plate, and took a final part in the horse-play which he had found so delightful in days gone by. The change did him good, but he was glad to get back to the Priory again,

and he told Cicely that he didn't think he should ever care to leave home for long after they were married.

"That is fortunate," she answered; "for I am quite sure that I shall not."

But Miss Skipwith, who chanced to overhear this expression of community of tastes, shook her head, for she had never contrived to banish the idea that Archie was more in love with the Priory than with his cousin.

"It will end badly. When people love one another they don't care where they live," was the old lady's muttered comment upon the fragment of dialogue which had reached her ears.

CHAPTER VI.

VICTOR REAPPEARS

During most London seasons there is one particular person who is a novelty and a success. The success, no doubt, is usually dependent and consequent upon the novelty, and those who in the course of one year have enjoyed the unstinted hospitality, kindness and flattery of the British capital will do well to betake themselves elsewhere the next, lest they be painfully reminded of the instability of men and things. While it lasts, however, that kind of popularity is probably pleasant to everybody, and it was certainly very pleasant to Madame Souravieff, who prided herself upon her social gifts.

These, it must be admitted, were considerably above the average, and as she appeared to have plenty of money and had been taken up at the outset by certain distinguished people, she had little difficulty in securing a general appreciation of them. Then, too, it was

known that she was a political something or other—perhaps a Nihilist, perhaps a paid or honorary agent of the Russian Government, it did not much matter which—and that of course lent an additional interest to her ways and manners. Such was the exoteric view of her, and it had the effect of earning for her more invitations to dinners and balls than she could possibly accept. But in the political world there were not wanting individuals who took her with a seriousness which would have amused her husband immensely. Grave statesmen listened with courtesy and attention to her persuasive eloquence; some of them (for she was really a very pretty woman, and her talk was almost as pretty as her face) even went the length of saying that they agreed with her to a great extent, and deplored, as she did, the ignorant obstinacy and obstinate ignorance of public opinion in this country. Moreover, she accomplished the complete subjugation of a newspaper editor, whom she asked to dinner repeatedly, and who was so won over by her fascinations or her arguments that he began writing leading articles upon the Eastern question which caused the constant reader to rub his eyes in stupefaction. Other editors, who perhaps had stuffed wax into their ears and had resisted the wiles of

the siren, exposed in scathing terms the folly of this most unpatriotic man; for upwards of a fortnight a heated controversy raged between Russophiles and Russophobes, and hints of the existence of feminine influence were printed in language plain enough to be understanded of the people. All of which served to enhance Madame Souravieff's reputation.

In short, she amused herself very well indeed, and was so busy that she had less time than usual for writing letters to Mark Chetwode and reading his replies. Otherwise she might possibly have noticed a gradual and suspicious change in the tone of his remarks about Miss Bligh. He was very cautious, he did not say much, but then he left a good deal unsaid, and though he still wrote as if this project of marrying him to the heiress was one for which his correspondent alone was responsible, there were signs that it had ceased to be in any way disagreeable to him. The Russian lady, however, was not alarmed. She had formed a mental picture of Cicely, in which that young lady figured as a simple rustic maiden who must be moulded and directed and made use of, but who should certainly be treated with all kindness and consideration. Mark, no doubt, would be bored by her at times; but Mark was

chivalrous; he would make an excellent husband, as husbands go, and he would always remember that he was indebted to his wife's fortune for the prominent political position which he would assuredly acquire sooner or later.

When Madame Souravieff heard the news of Morton's sudden death and realized that the so-called heiress would now become an heiress indeed, she rejoiced with a joy which, to give her her due, was almost entirely unselfish. She wrote a letter of hearty congratulation to Mark, from whom, in the course of a day or two, she received a very laconic reply.

"I have been preserved from exhibiting any indecent glee over the event which affords you so much satisfaction," he wrote, "because it does not, and never will, affect my destiny in the smallest degree. Irresistible as I am, Miss Bligh has managed to resist me. She is engaged to be married to her cousin, the young officer of cavalry, and I see myself condemned to celibacy, and to perpetual poverty, which is perhaps worse. For reasons which I need not specify, I have lately been cutting down a good many of my trees; but I daresay there still remains one with a bough solid enough for me to hang myself upon."

Madame Souravieff was much vexed. To accept a defeat was never agreeable to her, and Mark's supineness in the presence of adverse circumstances had often before this caused her irritation.

"He is insupportable," she muttered impatiently. "He gives in without a struggle; and how is one to help him, if he will not help himself? An engagement—bah! What are engagements in England? They have no force, no family sanction; they are made and broken every day. This one must be broken."

And straightway she despatched to Upton Chetwode peremptory instructions to that effect.

These apparently remained without result. For several weeks she had not so much as a line from Mark, and she was growing seriously uneasy about him when, one evening, she encountered for the second time the little lawyer who had asked to be introduced to her at Lord Queensferry's soon after her arrival in London. Mr. Wingfield bowed over his folded hands and recalled himself to the lady's recollection. She smiled and extended her hand to him amiably; for it was her rule to be amiable to everybody, added to which she thought that this man of law might have had some recent news of his client.

Her surmise proved to be correct. Mr. Wingfield had heard that very morning from Mark, who was desperately eager to quit the neighbourhood of Abbotsport, and was willing to let his house at a nominal rent to anybody who could be induced to relieve him of the expense of keeping it up.

"I told him that I myself might very likely take his house at the end of the season," remarked Madame Souravieff. "Is it inhabitable, his house?"

"Well—it is inhabited," answered the lawyer, with a smile.

"At all events, it could soon be made inhabitable, I have no doubt. And so he is anxious to run away? That is very foolish of him, in my opinion. What do you think?"

Mr. Wingfield was at first not very willing to say what he thought; but after he had been talked to with engaging candour for some minutes, he confessed that the news of Miss Bligh's engagement to her cousin had been a disappointment to him, and that he, too, had doubts as to whether it was necessarily irrevocable.

"It is to be remembered, however," he added, "that if the young lady should cancel her engagement during

her father's lifetime, an alteration in her father's will would be the probable consequence. At present, if I am correctly informed, she has been constituted sole heiress; but that is because she is going to marry a Bligh."

Madame Souravieff was not slow to seize the point of this warning.

"I see," she replied, musingly. "And how much longer will Mr. Bligh live, do you suppose?"

The lawyer made a deprecating gesture and laughed.

"We must not allow our attachment to our friends to lead us into wishing for anybody's death," said he, "but I am afraid poor Mr. Bligh is in a very precarious state. Under all the circumstances, I should doubt whether the marriage would take place for some time to come."

After this he took an early opportunity of withdrawing, having attained his object. It would be all very well for a plotting and contriving woman to suggest schemes to Mark which, though a shade equivocal in themselves, would doubtless be productive of benefit to all concerned in the long run, but a respectable solicitor had better not mix himself up with such transactions.

Madame Souravieff justified his somewhat uncivil estimate of her when she returned home from the party at which they had met; for instead of going to bed she sat up for a considerable length of time hatching plots and contrivances. She was disinterestedly anxious for Mark's advancement in life; but she was also anxious to obtain control over a part of the wealth which must shortly be at Miss Bligh's disposal. No cause can make headway without funds; and although her husband had made ample provision for her, her personal expenses were too heavy to allow of her forwarding large or constant remittances to the patriotic persons who appealed to her by almost every post. It was, therefore, most desirable that Mark should be encouraged and stirred up, and there was little hope that that could be done without personal supervision.

"I must go to him," was her conclusion. "One would have liked to finish the season here; but perhaps, after all, it is best to retire at a time when one is sure to be missed. That gives one a better chance of being welcomed when one returns."

On the following morning she was seated at her writing table by one of the windows, and had already scribbled off the opening sentences of a letter which

was destined to prepare Mark for the treat which was in store for him, when she espied on the opposite side of the street the well-known form of Count Souravieff's confidential servant.

"Again!" she exclaimed. "The poor dear man must have lost his head. What can he think that he will gain by sending his spies here now? He must be very badly informed if he doesn't know that Mark left London ages ago!"

But the obsequious Victor, who was ushered into her presence a few minutes later, after he had rung at the door and had been granted the interview which he respectfully craved, was able to show that his present visit was paid in a more honourable capacity than that with which she had credited him.

"*Madame la Comtesse* is mistaken," said he, in reply to her first contemptuous remark; "*Monsieur le Comte* has not sent me here to make any report to him, but simply to deliver a message on his behalf."

"That is a very regal fashion of communicating with me. However, since it amuses him—— And what is your message, pray?"

"*Madame la Comtesse* will perhaps allow me to make a little explanation. It appears that Madame has had

a great deal of success in London (one would expect no less!), that she has been very well received by the Ministers of the Queen, and that she has—how shall I express it?—produced impressions which may possibly influence the future foreign policy of this country."

Madame Souravieff bent her head and smiled slightly: this tribute to her political importance did not displease her.

"Rumours of this," continued Victor, "have reached us in our retirement, and have, I regret to say, had a disquieting effect on *Monsieur le Comte*."

"Impossible, my good Victor," returned Madame Souravieff, "that you can regret that more than I do. Convey the assurance of my sympathy to your master, and, at the same time, beg him to believe that any change which I may be able to bring about in the foreign policy of this country will not be to the disadvantage of my own."

Victor said that the patriotism of Madame was above suspicion, and must be patent to everybody. Unfortunately, however, *Monsieur le Comte* was extremely sensitive upon the subject of unauthorized diplomacy, and for some time past he had feared that Madame's activity—doubtless praiseworthy in itself—might not

be receiving the countenance or support of the Russian ambassador at the Court of St. James's. These fears had recently been confirmed in an unpleasant manner by a communication from St. Petersburg, in which *Monsieur* had been sharply rebuked and had been invited to exercise his domestic authority without delay. It was not considered desirable, *Monsieur* had been informed, that private individuals should claim the privilege of speaking, however indirectly, in the name of his Majesty the Czar. Such presumption could not be tolerated and must cease.

"*Madame la Comtesse* will perceive," observed Victor in conclusion, "that the language used was very peremptory."

This was not welcome hearing to Madame Souravieff, who had many irons in the fire, and was well aware that some of her schemes must of necessity be disavowed and ignored by the accredited representatives of her country, yet whose influence in high circles had been largely due to the circumstance that those accredited representatives had seemed to take a benevolent interest in her.

"Well," she said sharply, "and afterwards?"

The valet raised his shoulders and displayed the palms of his hands.

"With all submission," answered he, "my orders are to see that *Madame* leaves London forthwith."

"And if I refuse?"

"In that case, there will remain the means of persuasion that *Madame* knows of."

Nothing could be more cogent. It is useless to dispute the commands of those who have control over the supplies, and although Madame Souravieff was not devoid of power (because it was open to her to return to her husband and make herself so abominably disagreeable to him that he would offer her any money to go away again), he was evidently able to enforce her departure from London. As she had already almost made up her mind to depart, this did not distress her much; but of course she made a great grievance of it. It was impossible, she said, to take oneself off like that from one moment to another; she must at least have a week in which to find some shelter. She had thought of spending the summer very quietly in some remote country district. Would that arrangement be considered satisfactory? It was not, she presumed, intended to banish her from England altogether.

Victor, trying to conceal his surprise at this sudden

surrender, replied that he believed this plan would satisfy *Monsieur*.

"It is not impossible," continued Madame Souravieff, "that I may take a country house belonging to Mr. Chetwode."

The valet raised his eyebrows.

"A thousand pardons, *Madame*," said he; "but is it permitted me to inquire whether the master of the house would remain in it?"

"Certainly not; and if you ever dare to make such an insolent speech to me again I will take measures to make you regret it. I have already bribed you, and I could at any time obtain your dismissal: you must be aware of that. Nevertheless, you had better not disturb the Count's mind by mentioning to him the name of the gentleman whose house I propose to take. Here is some money for you."

She tossed him a bank-note (one of the Count's bank-notes) and dismissed him with the remark that he would probably be able to report the completion of his mission within a week. Then she sat down and began a long letter to Mark Chetwode.

CHAPTER VII.

MARK'S TENANT

FROM the day when Mark Chetwode admitted to himself his love for Cicely, he had no other wish than to leave Abbotsport for ever. He was not a vain man, but he hated to be ridiculous; and every time that he thought of his recent self-confidence he experienced a twinge about the region of the heart, which was caused almost as much by mortification as by the misery of unrequited love. How could he have been so fatuous?—he who prided himself upon his dispassionate judgment and freedom from illusions of any kind. He stood before the looking-glass and shrugged his shoulders in dismal derision of the image he saw reflected there. What a lined, unattractive, tired-looking face! How absurd to imagine that it is possible to fall in love with anything except beauty, or, at the very least, youth! Intellectually he was perhaps Archie Bligh's superior, but physically he was beyond measure the inferior of

that stalwart young fellow, and he had been an utter fool not to recognize his inferiority as well as its inevitable consequences.

With these reflections and others of a like nature to occupy him, his customary calm philosophy soon gave way to the irritable despair of a caged animal. He was dying to get away ; but how could he get away without money and with that useless millstone of a house about his neck ? It is even possible that there may have been yet another cause for his lingering at Upton Chetwode, and that, although he had abandoned all hope, he still hungered and thirsted for the sight of Cicely's face. That somewhat doubtful boon seemed, however, to be unattainable. The family at the Priory were, of course, living in the strictest retirement, and when he had called once to inquire after Mr. Bligh's health—upon which occasion he was not invited to enter the house—he felt that he had no excuse for further intrusion.

Chance was kind, or unkind, to him at length on a sunny afternoon when, strolling through one of the woods which bordered his property, he was brought face to face with Miss Bligh, who was returning home from the Rectory. She could not very well pass him without speaking, nor, for the matter of that, did such

appear to be her wish. She looked more beautiful than ever, he thought, in her deep mourning, which threw up the clear whiteness of her skin, and although she was a little grave, she did not affect the subdued manner usual with those who have experienced a recent bereavement. About that bereavement nothing was said; she spoke principally of her father, who, as she declared with an eagerness which betrayed misgiving, was very much better than he had been.

Not without hesitation did Mark make up his mind to ask whether the rumour which had reached him of her betrothal to her cousin was correct. He looked her full in the face while he put the question, and a faint flush mounted into her cheeks. But she replied without embarrassment:

"Yes, it is true that we are engaged. We haven't given it out publicly, because the engagement may very likely be a long one. I couldn't think of leaving papa until he is stronger."

Mark made use of some conventional phrases, for which she thanked him, and then came a pause. Perhaps his next observation was not in very good taste, but he had an intense desire to know for certain whether this match was one of love or convenience. So he said:

"In England and America, but nowhere else as far as I know, ladies are understood to have the privilege of consulting their own inclinations in the matter of marriage; but I have been told that this right is not invariably respected. I hope it has been in your case."

Thereupon she flushed again, and this time a good deal more deeply.

"If you knew me a little better," she replied, "you would hardly doubt that, I think. And," she added, with a perceptible touch of indignation in her tone, "if anybody has been telling you—that sort of thing will be said, I daresay—that I am being forced into this marriage for family reasons, you may contradict your informant upon my authority."

Well, that at any rate was explicit and conclusive enough.

It was on the following day that Mark wrote that despairing letter to Mr. Wingfield which, as we have seen, brought about, for one of its consequences, Madame Souravieff's determination to become his tenant. The announcement of this determination, which was expressed in a thoroughly characteristic style, reached him shortly afterwards.

"I take your house for three months from this day,"

Madame Souravieff wrote; "therefore make your arrangements accordingly. Do not, however, include your exit from the neighbourhood of Abbotsport among them, or the bargain is void. I know you, my dear Mark; you are like one of those strategists who withdraw their forces as soon as they perceive that they have been beaten according to the rules of war. The people who win battles don't trouble their heads about the rules of war. They go on fighting, and then, lo and behold! it turns out that the rules of war, like other rules, have exceptions. I am one of those people, and as you are under my orders (at least, you profess to be) you will oblige me by standing your ground until I give you the signal to advance and gain the victory.

"I do not ask you to remain in your own house as my guest; that you never would consent to do, and I admit that the arrangement would present difficulties. But you will easily find quarters near at hand.

"We will not have a formal lease, please; only tell me what I am to pay. The other day I was offered a house in the country for the summer months at a rent of thirty guineas a week. Will that do? I do not choose to give less—which you will almost certainly tell me to do—but of course I will willingly give more."

Then followed instructions that no preparations were to be made for her reception. She would send her own servants down a few days in advance, and they would see to all that was necessary.

It was not immediately that Mark decided to accept this very liberal offer. For one thing it denied him just what he wanted, freedom and escape; added to which, he shrank from the idea of being compelled to simulate a worn-out love, and dissimulate a new and far more ardent one. But in truth the offer was difficult to refuse. He could put forward no reason for refusal which would be considered valid for a moment; and besides, in spite of himself, the cheery self-reliance of the woman who had so long held sway over him moved him a little. There was, after all, something in what she said; battles are never lost until they are won. It even occurred to him as a possibility that he might be bold and confess the true state of affairs. Feminine nature is a curious thing, and have there not been instances of women who have helped the man who once loved them to marry somebody else? But he soon dismissed this preposterous idea—*une idée saugrenue*, as he called it, for he thought more often in French than in English. What seemed a less unreasonable thing to hope for was

that, after a time, Madame Souravieff would grant him a short leave of absence, which it would be easy to find some excuse for prolonging. He balanced the *pros* against the *cons* for an hour or thereabouts; but from the first it had been a foregone conclusion that Madame Souravieff would be obeyed, and an intimation that Upton Chetwode would be immediately vacated by its owner was despatched to her when the post went out.

Having thus committed himself, Mark summoned his factotum, to whom he said briefly:

"Pierre, I have let this house for the summer to Madame Souravieff, and she will take possession at once. I do not propose to leave the neighbourhood just yet, so you will have to find quarters for me somewhere near."

Pierre observed that suitable quarters might be a little difficult to discover at such short notice.

"We must put up with unsuitable ones then," returned his master. "Anything will do. I am not particular."

He was in reality extremely particular; but for some time past he had been living in a state of discomfort which before his arrival in England had been unknown to him; so that he was to some extent broken in, and

was able to submit without a murmur to the prospect of housing himself in the lodgings above Mr. Simpkins the grocer's shop, which were all that the active Pierre could offer him, after a day of search and inquiry.

"It must be confessed that there is an odour of cheese and of something else—I think it must be brown sugar—which penetrates into every part of the house of Simpkins," Pierre said, apologetically, "but the rooms themselves are not so bad. It appears that several of the assistant *pasteurs—curés*, he called them —have lived there and have not complained. For the rest, I suppose that Monsieur has not the intention of remaining long in Abbotsport."

Monsieur, who was not given to be communicative, took no notice of the last observation; he merely ordered Pierre to pack up forthwith, and on the ensuing morning Mr. Simpkins bustled out into the street in his shirt-sleeves and a white apron to receive the gentleman upon whom he now remembered with regret that he had lately been somewhat severe while discharging a public duty.

"No fault of mine, sir," he took occasion to explain. "Personally I was dead against saying anything of the kind; but until you've served on a jury you can't form

no idea of the hobstinacy of some jurymen, sir. We have to humour 'em a bit or we shouldn't get no verdict at all."

"I assure you I never thought of attaching the smallest importance to the proceedings of any of you," answered Mark, urbanely. "Pray don't let me keep you away from your business any longer now."

Simpkins, therefore, had to retire without finding out anything about the foreign lady who had so suddenly and incomprehensibly been seized with a fancy for Upton Chetwode. He avenged himself during the remainder of the day by telling his customers that for his part he didn't believe the mysterious stranger to be no lady at all, and that foreigners were a miserable, half-starved lot at best. "Poor Mr. Morant, he was a gentleman and kep' up what I call a proper establishment; but one can't 'ardly 'ope to see another like him in that tumbledown old place."

This, however, was a hasty and prejudiced assumption, as Mr. Simpkins was the first to admit when Madame Souravieff arrived with an imposing escort of domestics, and sent him an order for groceries which caused his round eyes to goggle like a toad's. The political interests of Russia do not, unfortunately,

coincide altogether with ours, and this inclines many of us to be more alive to Russian defects than to Russian virtues; but nobody can deny these people the merit of spending their money freely. It is a fine quality, and every true Briton appreciates it.

Mark was familiar with Madame Souravieff's regal way of doing things, and her faculty for making herself very comfortable wherever she went, but even he was amazed when he went to pay his respects to her and saw the transformation which a few days had effected in his dilapidated mansion.

"You are marvellous!" he exclaimed. "Nobody in the world but you could work these miracles. How do you contrive it?"

"Nobody but a nomad knows how to pitch a tent," she answered, laughing; "but when once the trick has been acquired it is simple enough. If I never had any more marvellous feats to perform than a little arrangement of upholstery, perhaps I should not look as old for my age as I do."

He made the requisite rejoinder, and then observed that she had now undertaken a feat which looked to him very like an impossibility.

"Well," said she, "that is what remains to be seen.

I admit that it will be impossible unless you help me, and we shall have to go to work with a great deal of caution. Luckily, there is no need for haste. The old gentleman must die in the belief that his daughter will marry her cousin; otherwise you would risk losing the estates altogether."

Mark pulled a wry face.

"I don't think we shall succeed," he said. "Is it worth while to be dishonourable and then to fail?"

"Oh, if you begin to make objections at the outset!"

"I don't wish to make objections; but I have a prejudice in favour of keeping my hands clean."

"You can wash them as soon as you have done your work. It is chiefly for that purpose that soap and water and religious creeds exist. The work of the world isn't clean work, as you ought to know. You belong to societies which are not over-scrupulous in the means that they employ to secure their ends."

"Do I? Well, I suppose I do. But then they never secure their ends, and so far as I know they seldom go beyond talking of the means. At any rate, they have never asked me to assassinate anybody."

"They might, though."

"Yes, that is a pleasing reflection. But public and

private affairs don't stand upon quite the same footing, do they?"

Madame Souravieff made an impatient gesture.

"Let us understand one another, Mark," said she. "You have an opportunity now which does not come twice in a lifetime. If you don't care to take advantage of it, tell me so, and you will spare me a good deal of trouble. But if you will be content to do as I tell you, the remainder of your life will most likely be much happier than mine. Do you think I never look forward to the future? Do you think that, if I were a selfish woman, I shouldn't prefer to leave you as you are? Only you are too cold and too sceptical to believe that any human being can be disinterested."

He made his peace with her and promised to obey her orders, not seeing that any other course was open to him. He could not tell her why he was sensitive in respect of his dealings with Cicely, and he was afraid that if he said any more about it she would guess. So he listened to the instructions that she had to give him, and answered to the best of his ability certain shrewd questions which she put to him with regard both to Cicely and to her affianced lover.

"The outlook is more promising than I expected,"

was her conclusion. "Such a girl as you describe will certainly grow tired of such a man if she has to talk to him and to nobody else every day for weeks together. Your part will be a very easy one at first. You will not obtrude yourself, but you will see her sometimes by accident, and when you do you will take care to let her perceive the difference between a cultivated man of the world and a stupid young soldier. If you could insinuate very discreetly that you were the victim of a hopeless passion, that would do no harm."

For the part assigned to him Mark felt that he possessed special aptitude, and this made him smile, which pleased Madame Souravieff.

"Come," she exclaimed, "a little courage! You shall be a Russian member of the English Parliament—perhaps even a Russian member of the English Ministry—before I have done with you. Consider the importance of that to me, and it will relieve you from the hard trial of believing that I have nothing to gain by working for you."

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF IS CRITICIZED

As may be imagined, the advent of the Russian lady, with her staff of servants, her horses, and her carriages, created no small stir in the vicinity of Abbotsport, and everybody wanted very much to know who she was and what in the world she had come there for. Thus it became imperative upon Mrs. Lowndes, in her character of local purveyor of news, to find some answer to questions which were being addressed to her from all quarters, and at the same time to gratify her own pardonable curiosity.

"Robert," said she, "we must call upon this Countess Thingummy. I hope she is all right, though I confess that I have my doubts. But I shall be better able to judge when I see her."

"Do you think she will like to be called upon?" asked the Rector, dubiously.

"I really don't know; but that isn't the question."

"What is the question, my dear? Whether she is all right? While that remains uncertain wouldn't it be better for us to avoid risk of contamination by leaving her alone?"

"A parish priest," returned Mrs. Lowndes, severely, "cannot be contaminated by visiting his parishioners. Indeed, it is his duty to visit them."

Mr. Lowndes yielded, as he very generally did when there was anything like a difference between him and his wife. It saves wear and tear to give in at first when you know that you will certainly have to give in at last; and so, later in the day, the Rector's pony-chaise was seen cutting up the fresh gravel which had been strewn in front of the entrance of Upton Chetwode.

It was seen, that is to say, by some of Madame Souravieff's retainers, but not by that lady herself, who, being in the drawing-room, the windows of which looked towards another point of the compass, was just the least bit in the world taken aback when her visitors were announced. No surprise, however, was perceptible in her manner of receiving them, and although at first she could not imagine who they were

or what they had come for, Mr. Lowndes's clerical garb soon enlightened her.

Of that honest gentleman's esteem she made a speedy conquest. She was not particularly well informed as to Anglican doctrines, but in those of the Orthodox Church (she was much too clever to call it the Orthodox Church) to which she belonged, she was thoroughly posted, and she at once led the conversation into a theological channel which Mr. Lowndes found most interesting.

"Our points of agreement are so many and our differences so comparatively unimportant," said he, after a time, "that I cannot help hoping that the dream of union and reconciliation may be realized some day. With Rome one knows that fraternization is not possible. Rome won't advance an inch to meet us nor abate one jot of her pretensions. She demands unconditional surrender, and that, I think I may say, she will never obtain from the bulk of the English nation."

"Rome," agreed Madame Souravieff, solemnly, "is the enemy. But for the Romish clergy we should never have had one-half of the trouble that we have had in Poland; and if Austria were not under the thumb

of the Pope we should long ago have found some means of reconciling our interest with hers."

"Oh, but if Austria is really under the thumb of the Pope, and if that is the result of her being so, I am afraid, as a loyal Briton, I must say that I am very glad of it," observed the Rector, laughing "We shouldn't quite like to see you and Austria making an amicable division of Turkey."

This gave Madame Souravieff an opportunity of explaining Russia's true mission in the East, and of pointing out how simple it would be to offer compensation to England, which would render the transfer of Constantinople to a civilized and civilizing power a positive advantage to her, instead of a menace: "it is a mere question of common sense and good will," she declared.

Thus the Rector quite forgot to put any personal questions to his interlocutor, and even so much as inquiring what had tempted her down to Abbotsport, while his wife fretted and fumed at the necessity under which she found herself of making conversation with Mark Chetwode. For Mark had been sitting with Madame Souravieff and had looked, as Mrs. Lowndes afterwards declared, "most dis-

tinctly caught" on being discovered. In any case, there was not much information to be got out of him.

"A sealed book!" the good lady exclaimed, impatiently, when she was once more seated beside her husband in the pony-chaise. "One would think he did it on purpose to be aggravating, and indeed I daresay he does. Nothing but 'yes' and 'no,' and sometimes an absurd affectation of ignorance. He didn't know what had induced the Countess to take his house; didn't know how long she meant to stay; didn't know whether he himself was going away or not—didn't know anything, in short! Not that he shows much wisdom in being so reticent; because that makes it pretty plain that he has something to conceal. You remember what I told you, Robert, when he first came down here. I said: 'Depend upon it, there is some entanglement.' Well—there you are!"

"Is Madame Souravieff an entanglement?" asked the Rector, with a tolerant smile, while he flicked the fat pony.

"That, I should think, must be obvious to everybody."

"Oh, well, it wasn't obvious to me. She isn't very

young, and it struck me that she was more interested in political and Church matters than anything else. A remarkably well informed and agreeable woman I thought her."

"My dear Robert, of course she's agreeable. As for Church matters, I should like to know what her Church has to say about a wife's duties. She has a husband—that much I did find out. And she usually lives apart from him. And Mr. Chetwode has taken Simpkins's poky little lodgings rather than leave Abbotsport while she is here. If these facts don't tell their own tale, I'm very much mistaken."

"Well, my dear, if you know all about it we need not grumble at Chetwode's silence," observed the Rector, good-humouredly.

That was the sort of speech which, as Mrs. Lowndes often said, made Robert such a provoking companion at times. He never would understand that things ought to be cleared up. So long as things are not cleared up, how can you tell where you are with people? Besides, she wanted to be able to confirm, or remove, the very natural doubts felt in the neighbourhood.

At the Priory, as elsewhere, the stranger was made the subject of a little discussion; but in that house

there could be no present question of calling upon anybody, and as it was understood that Madame Souravieff had only taken Upton Chetwode for the summer, not much conjecture was spent upon her.

"One of Chetwode's Russian friends, I suppose," remarked Mr. Bligh. "I hope she is paying him a good rent; for I suspect that he needs it, poor fellow!"

"It is more likely that he is letting her have the use of the house for nothing; he always seems to me to be a man who cares very little about money," said Miss Skipwith, whose *penchant* for Mark had survived the destruction of the hopes which she had once entertained on his behalf.

But Mr. Bligh did not appear to be greatly interested in Mark or in Madame Souravieff, or indeed in anybody. Ever since the attack which had followed Morton's death he had been singularly apathetic, and his painful efforts to rouse himself when his daughter was in the room were apparent to everybody except to Cicely, who would not see them.

She closed her eyes to this and other ominous indications of her father's state; but she was less blind with regard to Archie, who had changed in more ways than one. It was not only that he had fits of unaccountable

depression, but that he had become nervous and irritable, and, what was still worse, was developing a tendency to be exacting. Now this was just what Cicely had dreaded from the first. She was very fond of him and very unwilling to hurt his feelings, yet, for both their sakes, he ought to be made to understand that that kind of thing would never do, and that he must not look cross or injured if she declined to be always at his beck and call.

One morning, when she was obliged to say that she was too busy to go out riding with him, he turned away with such an impatient movement and sighed so noisily that the right moment seemed to have come for reading him a lecture. This she accordingly did—with results that were not altogether satisfactory. He begged her pardon very humbly; he admitted that he had shown temper, and that he ought not to have done so; but he did not quite lay aside his aggrieved air, and that was the one thing that she had wanted him to do.

"The truth is, Archie," she said, "that you are out of sorts; that is what makes you unreasonable. It can't be good for you to live as you are doing now, without any amusement and never seeing other men. I wish you would go away for a few weeks. Why shouldn't you?"

"If you wish me to go," he answered, dolefully, "of course there's no reason why I shouldn't and every reason why I should. How long must I be away?"

"That is silly," returned Cicely, her own temper beginning to give way a little; "you know perfectly well that I only suggest your going away because you evidently need a change. Do just as you like about it, only please don't behave like a spoilt boy."

She left the room without giving him time to make any rejoinder, for she had no intention of quarrelling with him; but her conscience soon began to smite her, and when she next saw him and noticed his woebegone countenance, she felt that she had spoken too sharply. It is not wise to whip a dog or a child or to snub a lover, and afterwards to exhibit signs of regret for what you have done. The temptation is sometimes strong, but it should always be resisted by such as desire to retain their authority. Cicely, who was accustomed to authority and tolerably skilful in the exercise of it, was not unaware of this elementary rule; but after all she had promised to be Archie's wife, and perhaps it was hardly right to trample upon him.

She therefore proceeded to undo the effect of her

reproof (which had been really salutary) by saying, with a smile :

"Haven't you forgiven me yet, Archie? I was very disagreeable this morning, I know, but I want to make friends again now, and I find I shall have time for a short gallop with you, if you don't mind starting rather late."

So Archie went round to the stable-yard to give the necessary orders, and soon after five o'clock they set forth for a certain broad stretch of down that they knew of, where the exhilaration of feeling good horses under them, and the rush of the soft westerly wind in their faces, soon swept away all remains of discontent or ill-humour.

The very best way of making up a quarrel is doubtless to say no more about it, and the quarrels of lovers are generally supposed to terminate in a manner rather pleasing than otherwise. But of these two persons only one could be called a lover, and for that reason it might possibly have been better if the little scene of the morning had led to a fuller explanation between them. As it was, Cicely still thought that the young man would do well to leave the Priory for a time and amuse himself, while he still thought her proposition a heart-

less one. For the time being, however, they repressed their respective opinions, and, having thoroughly enjoyed their ride, fell back naturally to those easy terms of comradeship which had subsisted between them prior to their engagement, and the continuance of which was all that Cicely, for her part, desired.

Now, on that same afternoon, as chance would have it, Madame Souravieff, who had brought saddle-horses down from London, had persuaded Mark Chetwode to make use of one of them; and so it came to pass that this couple, while jogging homewards, espied another couple ahead of them.

"Nothing could be better!" Madame Souravieff exclaimed, when she had been told who these equestrians were. "We will canter on and overtake them, and you shall introduce me. I had been wondering how we could contrive to bring about an accidental meeting."

Mark would just as soon have deferred that meeting a little longer; for the idea of bringing his old and his new love together jarred upon him somehow. But of course the thing had to be done sooner or later, and upon this occasion, as it turned out, the two ladies only exchanged a swift mutual glance of curiosity and a few unmeaning words. For four people cannot very comfortably ride

abreast, and Madame Souravieff thought it best that she should undertake the young soldier and leave Mark to give evidence of his respectful sympathy with the heiress in this time of domestic trial.

Mark did not do that, being aware that Cicely's domestic sorrows were not of a kind which she cared to talk about, but he bore a previous hint of his mentor's in mind and took some trouble to say clever things without apparent effort. Cicely, who had always liked him and found him interesting, did, as a matter of fact, draw some half-unconscious comparisons between him and her cousin, which could not be to the latter's advantage. She was young; she had been leading a very dull life of late; and it was pleasant to be entertained by one who had seen so much of the world and could talk so amusingly of his varied experiences.

"And now are you going to begin wandering about again?" she asked. "Have you let your house for any length of time?"

"Only for three months, I believe," he answered. "Indeed, I can hardly imagine that Madame Souravieff will care to stay so long."

"Well, that will depend upon what brought her here, won't it? I suppose she wouldn't have taken Upton

Chetwode if she hadn't been anxious for a quiet sort of existence."

"To tell you the truth, I suspect that one of her principal reasons was that she wanted to give a little help to an impecunious friend," answered Mark; for he had thought over what he should say upon the subject. "She is a very old friend of mine," he added. "I used to see a great deal of her and Count Souravieff in St. Petersburg."

"And what has become of Count Souravieff? Is he dead?"

"No, but he has a chronic derangement of the liver, which makes him rather a disagreeable person to live in the house with. Besides, his wife holds strong political opinions which he doesn't share. So, as a general rule, he goes his way and she goes hers. It is one of those cases in which no blame attaches to either side, and after a certain time of life people who don't suit one another are wiser to live apart if they can, I think."

Cicely made no comment upon this succinct account of the Russian lady's domestic affairs; but she glanced at the figure in front of her, which looked youthful enough in a riding-habit and it occurred to her that

the time of life referred to by Mark must be reached rather early. Her next question was:

"Where do you think of going this summer? You don't intend to spend it above Simpkins's shop, I presume."

"I scarcely know what I intend," he answered, candidly. "I wanted to go as soon as I left the house; but I couldn't run away just as Madame Souravieff came; and now——"

"And now you don't think you can run away as long as she remains?" suggested Cicely, after waiting in vain for him to finish his sentence.

"No; if I linger here in spite of the smell of Mr. Simpkins's cheese, it won't be for that reason, I think," he answered, with a laugh which ended in a sigh.

"For what reason, then?" she inquired, wonderingly.

"Some day, perhaps, I may tell you; but it is much more likely that I never shall. In any case it is an absurd reason. Let us talk about something else."

It will be perceived that Mark knew how to carry out instructions. His manner of doing so, which may perhaps, in narration, give an idea of some-

what rough workmanship, must nevertheless be pronounced to have been successful, inasmuch as he had managed to rouse Cicely's curiosity and even to convey to her a very vague inkling of the truth. It was only a very vague inkling; because, although she was aware that a great many men admired her, she was by no means ready to believe that they loved her. It was, however, quite sufficient for Mark's purpose; and seeing the impression that he had produced, he wisely forbore to deepen it.

Madame Souravieff, in the meantime, had had no difficulty at all with Archie. She sometimes, though not often, found a difficulty in getting on with women, but never with men, and if this one was a little taciturn at first, she soon made him loquacious. On reaching the point where their paths diverged, she begged him to come and see her some day, when he had nothing better to do, and took leave of him and Cicely with smiling friendliness, mingled with just so much of formality as is becoming in a lady who has not yet been called upon.

But she became grave when she and Mark were once more alone together. She rode beside him in silence for some little distance, and then turned upon him

abruptly with the remark which he had been quite sure that she would make:

"*Savez-vous qu'elle est furieusement belle, votre heritiere?*"

"So I told you long ago," he answered, dryly.

"No, you said she was pretty—that is a very different thing."

"You are not going to accuse me of having lost my heart to her, I hope," said Mark, turning his impassive face towards his companion.

She gave her shoulders a jerk and laughed.

"Perhaps not. In order to lose one's heart one must first have a heart to lose. Still the fact remains that Miss Bligh is beautiful and—and that I am no longer what I was."

Mark had to reassure her and to drag forth certain long-disused protestations from the recesses of his memory. It was not a pleasant occupation and he did not enjoy it; but when he had done, he had at least the satisfaction of knowing that he had lulled her awakening suspicions. Possibly Madame Souravieff was not unwilling that they should be lulled.

CHAPTER IX.

SIR PETER SHAKES HIS HEAD

Archie told Cicely that he thought Madame Souravieff "a very good sort." She had been saying to him, it appeared, how fond she was of Englishmen and English ways; she had a capital seat on a horse, she was surprisingly well-informed as to the strength and efficiency of the British army, and had spoken about it in terms of unqualified admiration, the sincerity of which it was impossible to doubt. In short, Archie was free to confess that he never would have expected to find such a combination of estimable qualities in a Muscovite. "She asked me to call upon her some day," he remarked. "Do you think I might go?"

"Why not?" asked Cicely, laughing.

"Well, I wasn't quite sure whether it would be the proper thing. I suppose *you* wouldn't come with me?"

"Not just yet. She will understand that I can't pay visits at present; or if she doesn't understand, you can explain to her."

The little that Cicely had seen and heard of Mark's tenant had not inspired her with any very strong desire to cultivate that lady's acquaintance; but she was only too glad that Archie should have somebody besides herself to exchange ideas with, and she urged him to take advantage of the invitation which he had received.

"You will be doing an act of charity by helping Mr. Chetwode to entertain her," she observed, demurely.

Circumstances, however, soon arose which necessitated the indefinite postponement of that charitable act, and caused Cicely to forget that any such person as Madame Souravieff existed. For the very next morning Mr. Bligh's valet came running downstairs with an alarmed face, to say that he thought the doctor ought to be sent for. His master had had a quiet night and had awoke much as usual, but in the last few minutes there had been what he called "a sudden change," and he was afraid things were going to take a turn for the worse again.

The change of which he spoke, and which could hardly be described as sudden, was simply that which heralds the approach of death; and even Cicely could not deceive herself as to its meaning when she entered her father's bedroom. He was lying back in his chair

with his eyes closed, and was apparently in a state of stupor. Every vestige of colour had left his cheeks; his breathing was laboured and irregular; his long, thin fingers twitched convulsively every now and then. It did not need the melancholy air and solemn circumlocutions of the doctor, who came in all haste, to convince Cicely that the time had come to bid farewell to hope. Nevertheless she insisted upon despatching a telegram to Sir Peter Parsons.

"It is a great expense and will be quite useless," the local practitioner told Archie; "the whole College of Physicians could do no good now."

"But she wishes it," returned the young man; "and what signifies the expense? It is of no consequence to her."

"That is true, no doubt," assented the other, with rather a wistful sigh (for he could not help thinking what an immense number of people he would have to kill or cure before he could hope to realize such a sum as the great man would receive in return for a comfortable railway journey and a shake of the head). "If it is any comfort to Miss Bligh to hear the worst upon higher authority than mine, so be it. But I almost doubt whether Sir Peter will be here in time."

Sir Peter arrived in time to fulfil the forecast of his provincial *confrère* by shaking his head, but more than that he could not do, except to promise that he would remain in the house until all was over—which, he added, would be a question of hours only.

"You may remember," he said to Archie, "that I warned you of what must be expected. I would have warned the poor girl also; only it seemed best to spare her the wretchedness of waiting for weeks or months in daily dread of the blow falling."

Sir Peter had doubtless acted mercifully, but Cicely felt as most people feel at such times, and was not disposed to be grateful to him for his consideration. She ought to have been told, she thought. Why had she been kept in ignorance while everybody else had been prepared? Why had she been allowed to be cheerful and behave as though the danger were over? It had made her seem cruel to her father, who (as her aunt told her by way of comforting her) had been under no illusion as to his hopeless state. These thoughts, however, she kept to herself. There was no use now in reproaching people who had meant to be kind; only she wished they would all go away and leave her with her father, who showed no sign of returning consciousness.

But of course they did not go away. They stood about and whispered and crossed the room on tiptoe, in accordance with what would appear to be one of the dictates of human nature. It is difficult to see why one should not be allowed to die alone, since nobody thinks of grudging one the privilege of living alone; but we may as well make up our minds that, unless we have the good fortune to meet with a violent death, the last thing that we shall see in this world will be a circle of faces of preternatural length, and must console ourselves with the reflection that they will resume their usual and more becoming outline very soon after we have left them. To Mr. Bligh it mattered not at all whether many or few spectators witnessed the losing battle which he was fighting, for only his body was engaged in that struggle, his mind having already retired from the field never to return. Before midnight the universal conqueror scored one more victory, and for the first time in the history of an ancient and honourable family the Bligh estates, with all the endowments and responsibilities attaching thereto, passed into the possession of a woman.

When Mr. Bligh had ceased to breathe, others

perhaps breathed more freely. They sincerely regretted one who all his life long had had many friends and no enemies; still they had known that he was doomed and they were not sorry that a painful scene was over, and they all agreed in praising the courage and composure with which Cicely had passed through it..

With courage she might be credited, for that was a quality inherent in her blood; but composure gave way as soon as she had reached her bedroom, where she threw herself face downwards upon the sofa and so lay, sobbing miserably, until Nature obtained the mastery over her and brought her an hour or two of sleep. Nature always has the last word, though she sometimes allows us to fancy that we can command her. Nature goes quietly on with her ceaseless work of destruction and renewal, brings us health and sickness and death, makes us sad and then merry again, whether we will or no. Mercifully, however, we are so constituted that in moments of excitement or emotion we cannot believe this. We very often speak of love as eternal, occasionally meaning what we say; and when those whom we have loved most are taken from us, we almost always feel certain that our

wounds cannot at any future time be wholly cured or cease to pain us. Cicely, at any rate, had somewhat better reasons than most of us have in times of bereavement for thinking that she could never again be as happy as she had been. A dispassionate outsider might have told her that it was extremely probable that she never would. Her father's death must of necessity draw a sharp line across the course of her life, concluding the first portion of it, which had been exceptionally free from cares of any kind. From that day forth she would have to bear upon her shoulders the burden of duties which women seldom discharge satisfactorily, and she was engaged to be married to a man of whom it might safely be predicted that he would give her assistance in matters of detail only. Mr. Lowndes had once told him that whoever married Cicely Bligh must resign himself to accept the part of prince-consort. It is a difficult part to play, demanding an even temper, much tact, and not a little forbearance.

But of course it was not the prospect of the future in this sense that overwhelmed Cicely with sorrow. What was so terrible to her was that her father should have left her without one word of

farewell, and that her last words to him should have been careless words, expressing no anxiety about him, nor anything of the affection which, as it seemed to her, was the one strong sentiment of which she had been or ever would be capable. It may have been from some undefined fear lest Archie should imagine that he could offer her in his own proper person a substitute for what she had lost, or it may have been because his attempts to comfort her were not very adroit, that she avoided him during the days which followed and gave him to understand that she preferred the companionship of her Aunt Susan, who was tearful and sympathetic yet perplexed by behaviour which struck her as unnatural.

It was after Mr. Bligh's coffin had been laid beside that of his son, and the family lawyer had come and gone, and the blinds at the Priory had been pulled up again, that Miss Skipwith imparted some of her misgivings to the Rector of the parish. She said:

"My heart fails me about Cicely. She doesn't care for that young man, and it is useless for her to pretend that she does."

"My dear Madam, what can have put such a notion

as that into your head?" cried Mr. Lowndes, who did not think highly of Miss Skipwith's intelligence. "As far as I can judge, the young people are simply devoted to one another."

"Oh yes; but you are only a man and you can't judge," returned Miss Skipwith, with unwonted sharpness. "You don't live in the house either; so you haven't seen how she has shrunk from him and kept him at arm's length ever since her great sorrow came upon her."

"If that is all, I don't think you need be much alarmed," said the Rector. "Trouble affects a great many people like physical pain, and makes them dislike to be touched or approached. I can quite understand her feeling."

"I am by no means sure that you do," returned Miss Skipwith, shaking her head. "She isn't sensitive in the way that you suppose; it seems to be a relief to her to talk about her father and about the past and the future. Only it is to me, not to him, that she speaks. Say what you will, that is not the way in which any girl would treat the man whom she loved."

"Well, but if she doesn't love him, why should she have accepted him?"

"We know that these mistakes are not uncommon: it is very fortunate when they are discovered in time to be repaired. My own feeling is that the young man ought to go away. The marriage cannot take place for many months to come, and——"

"Why can't it?" interrupted the Rector.

"Because Cicely wouldn't hear of such a thing; nor would it be proper. Indeed, I am not at all clear that it is proper for him to stay on in the house, under the circumstances. What do you think?"

"I don't see the harm of his being here, so long as Cicely has you to act as her chaperon," answered the Rector; "but I don't set up to be an authority upon such points. I'll ask Mrs. Lowndes if you like."

This kind offer Miss Skipworth declined with more promptitude than appreciation. She did not want to be taught her duty by Mrs. Lowndes, though she would have been willing to accept advice from her parish priest, had it been of a nature to lend support to her own views. Apparently, however, he was not to be counted upon as an ally; so in the course of a few days she adopted what, after all, was the most straightforward plan and attacked Cicely personally.

"My dear child," said she, when she had led up to the

subject by various preliminary circlings and doublings, "you are only laying up unhappiness for yourself. You have a strong feeling of attachment for your cousin, which I don't say he may not deserve, but you cannot deceive me into supposing that you care for him as a wife should care for her husband."

"What makes you say that, Aunt Susan?" asked Cicely, raising her heavy eyes, with a wondering and startled look.

"It is obvious," replied the old lady; "he himself must see it. All this time you have been giving yourself the greatest trouble to keep him at a distance; and if you dont't know why you have been doing that, I can tell you. Believe me, it would be wiser and kinder—though it may not be pleasant—to confess to him at once that you do not love him."

This, as we know, was a confession that Cicely had already made; but she did not feel inclined to repeat it to her aunt, by whom it was likely to be misunderstood. Nevertheless, she might have thought of some rather more judicious rejoinder than:

"You don't lose any time in asking me to do what would have distressed papa more than anything else. It was his one great wish that I should marry Archie,

and you may be sure that he would never have wished me to do that if he hadn't been convinced that I should be happy as Archie's wife."

"Exactly so," agreed Miss Skipwith, seizing the weapon offered to her; "that is precisely my feeling about it. If your poor father had seen what I have seen, he would have been the first to say what I have just said."

"You think you see things because you want to see them, Aunt Susan," returned Cicely. "If I have seemed unkind to Archie, I am very sorry for it; but I hope he has made some allowance for me. Such as I am, I believe he is not dissatisfied with me; and if he ever is, it will be for him to complain, not for other people. Please say no more about it."

Miss Skipwith was easily cowed, and when her niece looked at her after a certain fashion she invariably succumbed. All she ventured to ask was:

"And is he to remain in this house until your wedding-day? It is your house now, you must remember, and he is here as your guest."

"He is a very welcome one," answered Cicely. "Whether he stays or goes must be as he pleases; he certainly will not be turned out by me."

This closed a discussion which had not helped Miss Skipwith's case, but from which that of Archie derived indirect benefit. For Cicely now saw that she had put his patience and his submissiveness to a somewhat too severe test, and from that day she began once more to exert herself to please him. She began also to exert herself in other ways, and though her heart was still heavy, her speech resumed something of its customary cheerfulness and decision.

CHAPTER X.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF SETS TO WORK.

Abbotsport which, through all the varieties of wild weather which commonly set in about the middle of September and rage with little intermission until the middle of May, looks not less bleak and stormbeaten than other fishing villages on the south coast, is transformed for three or four months out of every year into as lovely, peaceful, and slumbrous a seaside retreat as any overworked Londoner could dream of. Then the sun shines down with strength upon the slate roofs, and makes the chalk cliffs so dazzlingly white that no one can look at them without blinking; then the sea is at rest, and barelegged children can paddle about among the rocks at low water to their hearts' content, and the trees on either side of the road which leads to the Priory and to Upton Chetwode give a grateful shade, and every wooded dell and green bank is bright with wild flowers. At this season Abbotsport, always disposed to

be contemplative, indulges largely in those habits of placid meditation which soften life and tend to prolong it; at this season, too, it does the greater part of its courting; and if there were any accommodation to be found in the place (but there is not, for the Seven Stars is apt to be a little noisy after sunset, and Mr. Simpkins's lodgings are seldom free from clerical occupation), an idle or a weary man might do worse than betake himself thither, and might derive as much amusement as was necessary for his purpose from watching the humours of a primitive community.

But there are many men who know nothing of the pleasure of inaction: men (Anglo-Saxon, for the most part, by race) who are blessed with such redundant health and vigour that unless they are tiring their bodies in some way their minds grow restless and uneasy; and these usually prefer winter to summer, because in winter they can be hunting or shooting all day long, whereas in summer there is not much to be done except to play cricket, and cricket is not obtainable everywhere. It was not obtainable, save in a very rudimentary form, at Abbotsport; and even if it had been, it would hardly have been considered decorous for Archie Bligh to take any part in it so soon after his

uncle's death. Very likely the morbid irritation from which he could not free himself may have been due in some degree to want of exercise, and undoubtedly Cicely was right in thinking that change of air and scene would have done him good.

This, however, she refrained from saying—now that she was his hostess it was less easy to say such things—and he himself had an unreasoning dread of leaving the Priory. He was still haunted by the fear that something would happen to prevent his marriage. He often thought that old Coppard harboured distrustful surmises about him; he felt as if he would not be safe if his back was turned. Hence it came to pass that when Cicely once more admitted him to frequent and intimate intercourse she was astonished and not best pleased at his fits of petulance, while he tortured himself with doubts as to whether she was not becoming tired of him.

One day Mr. Lowndes said to him:

"In my opinion, Archie, the sooner you are married the better. You needn't have a gay wedding; let it be as quiet and private as Cicely pleases: but get her to fix a date. You will both be much happier when you are man and wife."

He acted upon this not very judicious advice, thereby earning an indignant rebuke for himself. Cicely would not hear of anything in the shape of a festivity taking place for another year at least, and said he must be well aware that her marriage could not and would not be allowed to be solemnized without festivities.

"I don't think you understand how you hurt me when you make such suggestions," she said.

"I don't want to make any suggestions that are disagreeable to you," answered Archie. "Of course it is for you to decide how much longer our engagement shall last."

But he did not offer the apology which he certainly would have offered a few weeks earlier, and his tone was almost sulky. Well was it for him that he had to deal with a character which, being stronger than his own, had much of the magnanimity which belongs to conscious strength. Cicely was willing to pardon him a great deal and to overlook little manifestations of temper; nevertheless, he inevitably fell somewhat in her esteem—which Miss Skipwith and Madame Souravieff would have considered a hopeful sign.

The latter lady, although she had the etiquette of every European nation at her fingers' ends and never

infringed established rules through ignorance, sometimes thought fit to do so intentionally, and her audacity was generally smiled upon by Fortune, which is said to favour the audacious. To drive up to the Priory and insist upon admittance, notwithstanding the shocked surprise of the butler and his assurance that Miss Bligh received no visitors, was, it must be acknowledged, a tolerably bold thing to do; but she had carried through more difficult enterprises than that in her time and had no fear of the consequences.

"You must not blame your servants," she said, when she had been shown into the little room where Cicely was sitting alone; "they told me that you would not see me, so I forced my way into the house in spite of them. It was bad taste, if you will; but when one is brought face to face with one of the dreadful realities of life, one forgets all petty conventionalities—at least I do." She was holding the girl by both hands and looking kindly and compassionately into her eyes. "I have been thinking so much of you since I heard of your sad misfortune," she went on, "and I have longed to come and tell you how well I know what you must be feeling. At last I said to myself, 'Well, at the worst, she can but turn me out,' and I came. Poor

child! I have been through it all—my case was just like yours. My mother died when I was a baby, and my father was everything to me. Then he was taken from me—and I married Monsieur Souravieff."

There were genuine tears upon Madame Souravieff's eyelashes as she told this concise and pathetic tale. It was really almost true, and she had such a faculty for throwing herself into any part which she might be playing that the memory of her girlhood quite affected her for the moment. Cicely also was touched and did not resist the further advances of this sympathetic fellow-sufferer, who sat down on a sofa beside her, still holding her hands, while she talked in a low, pleasantly modulated voice about the tie which sometimes exists between a father and daughter, and which, as she said, sometimes, but far more rarely, also unites a husband and wife. Then she went on to dwell upon the many things that she had heard in praise of Mr. Bligh—his kindness of heart, his charity, his cheerful endurance of suffering; and she was careful not to breathe a word about consolation. All this was very skilful of her; for she made Cicely cry and reached the girl's heart, and was permitted to embrace her tenderly. The next step was somewhat less easy, for Cicely was by nature

very loyal and not very communicative, but at length Madame Souravieff obtained an admission that Archie did not quite realize the nature or extent of his cousin's grief, and of this she took quick advantage.

"Of course he doesn't!" she cried. "How should he, poor young man? He cannot think of anything or anybody but you; and that is no fault of his. Men are always like that when they are in love. I wonder," she continued, meditatively, "whether it would be at all a relief to you if Mr. Chetwode and I were to take him off your hands sometimes and try to divert him."

Cicely jumped at this rather hazardous proposition with suspicious alacrity.

"It would be most kind of you if you would," she answered. "He doesn't complain, but I can see that he finds this monotonous existence depressing, and of course it must be bad for him!"

"That," thought Madame Souravieff to herself, "is conclusive; she not only does not care for her soldier, but she is heartily sick of him. I expected as much." Aloud she said: "Well, then, I will do what I can. I am living quite alone, as you know, and I should like to ask you to come and see me sometimes; but I won't do that, because I am sure that you would rather be left to

yourself. Perhaps your cousin would dine with me one evening, though, and I would get Mr. Chetwode to meet him."

And as at this moment Archie himself entered the room, she struck while the iron was hot. She offered no explanation of her presence, which evidently surprised him, but, after having shaken him by the hand, said cheerfully:

"I was just asking Miss Bligh whether she thought you could be persuaded to look in upon me at dinner-time any day this week. I have no inducements to hold out; but if you would come and smoke a cigar with Mr. Chetwode you would do an act of charity both to him and to me. Mr. Chetwode dines with me every now and then, because he thinks it his duty to do so; but our stock of conversational subjects has run very low, and we are sadly in need of a third person to provide us with fresh ones."

"Oh—thank you," answered Archie, glancing doubtfully at Cicely; but as he received a smile and a slight gesture of encouragement in return, he went on to say that he would like very much to accept Madame Souravieff's invitation.

"Then let us make it Thursday," returned that lady

briskly, and immediately afterwards rose to take her leave, kissing Cicely once more on both cheeks before she retired.

When the door had closed behind her Archie looked notes of interrogation of the largest size.

"She came to tell me that she was sorry for me," Cicely said, explanatorily. "She was really very kind. It wasn't the sort of thing that an Englishwoman would have done, but it was done so simply and nicely that one couldn't feel anything except grateful to her."

Archie looked a little puzzled, for it appeared to him that Madame Souravieff had taken a liberty which he could have sworn that Cicely would resent.

"And about my dining there," he asked; "is that all right?"

"Perfectly right. I don't want you to think that you must shut yourself up because I do; on the contrary, I wish you to see people. I shouldn't like you to go to a dinner-party, and I know you wouldn't go; but smoking a cigar with Mr. Chetwode is quite another thing. I wonder whether Madame Souravieff herself smokes, as they say that so many Russian ladies do. I hope she doesn't."

As a matter of fact, Madame Souravieff did sometimes smoke cigarettes, but she denied herself that indulgence

on the following Thursday evening, because, being pretty well versed in the principles of diplomacy, she was always very careful to avoid trampling upon the prejudices of any one with whom she might wish to ingratiate herself. Now she had reasons of her own for wishing to ingratiate herself with Archie, and it was easy to perceive that he belonged to that class of honest Britons who look with dislike and distrust upon all foreign habits.

At any rate, he neither disliked nor distrusted Madame Souravieff, who treated him to an admirable dinner and a most amusing description of her season in London. Mark took little or no part in the conversation, to which indeed he scarcely listened, until Miss Bligh's name was introduced, when he pricked up his ears. Madame Souravieff was speaking with affectionate warmth of Cicely's charms of person and manner, and Archie was looking pleased and a trifle embarrassed. After a time, the latter, who differed from his cousin in that he was not of a reticent temperament, and who was therefore far more manageable than she, was led on to mention his perplexities and the uncertainty which he felt as to what he ought to do.

"Well, it *is* a little awkward," said he, in answer to

some observation of Madame Souravieff's; "old Miss Skipwith was hinting as much to me this morning, and I couldn't contradict her. Mr. Lowndes thinks, and so do I, that there is no reason why we should not be married quietly in the autumn; but Cicely has an idea that it would be disrespectful to her father's memory to have the wedding within a year of his death; so there it is. I'm sure I don't know whether it would be the right thing for me to stay a whole year at the Priory as her guest or not."

"I think, if I were you, I should leave that question open for the present," answered Madame Souravieff, after apparently giving it due consideration. "I should say nothing about it for a few months. When she has recovered from the first shock of her loss she will very likely look at things in a different way."

The subject was not pursued farther at that time, because Madame Souravieff now professed a great anxiety to hear the game of polo described; but later in the evening Archie reverted to it.

"I'm glad you think I may stay on where I am," he observed, musingly. "After all, I have never had any home but the Priory; it isn't as if my being engaged to Cicely were the only reason for my living there. And

then I think I may be of use to her in managing things —if she'll let me."

"I should remain on that account, if on no other," Madame Souravieff replied. "It stands to reason that the management of the property must be given over to you eventually, and if I were Miss Bligh I should be only too thankful to let you take it at once."

Archie smiled.

"It isn't Cicely's way, to resign her functions to an adjutant," he remarked.

"Oh, she is young; she has still many things to learn. Amongst others, that no husband who is worth anything will consent to act as a mere adjutant. But I must not venture to criticize her or I shall make you angry."

It is quite possible that such a criticism might have angered Archie a short time before; but it had not that effect upon him now. On the contrary, he thought it fair enough; although he had made up his mind that if his future wife should decide to exercise undivided authority, no protest should be entered by him. He was much pleased with the Russian lady, whose frank friendliness and quick comprehension of his feelings supplied what he had felt to be a want in his life.

Chetwode, too, was not such a bad fellow in his way. During the half-hour which he had spent with Chetwode in the dining-room after dinner he had found him agreeable and full of information on all sorts of subjects, which had been rather hinted at than displayed. An awfully clever fellow—there was no doubt about that—yet not bumptious, as clever fellows so often are.

Sad to say, this favourable judgment was not reciprocated by its subject. After accompanying Madame Souravieff's guest to the door and taking a cordial leave of him, Mark returned to the drawing-room with the ejaculation of:

"What a booby!"

"So much the better for you," observed Madame Souravieff, composedly.

"Not necessarily; a booby generally makes a good husband. If I may be permitted to ask—why did you not recommend him to leave the neighbourhood when he gave you such a fine opening?"

"You may be permitted to ask anything, but you ought to be ashamed of requiring an answer to such a question. Do you wish the girl to be cured of her weariness of him? Do you wish the collision which

must occur when the question of who shall be master arises to be postponed until it is no longer a matter of interest to you? I will not call you a booby, my dear Mark, but I will take the liberty of saying that you would make a terrible mess of this affair if I were not at your elbow."

"Very probably I should; and even now—the truth is—pardon me—that it is a somewhat dirty affair."

He was thinking rather of his share in it than of hers when he said so; for he could not forget that he proposed to deceive one person more than she did; but she naturally accepted the stricture as aimed at herself alone, and her temper, which was of the Slavonic variety, blazed up suddenly.

"You go too far!" she exclaimed. "You insult me! Another such speech and I renounce you. I wash my hands of you—yes, for ever!"

"It is what I have often advised you to do," observed Mark, composedly.

She broke into a flood of passionate, incoherent reproaches, referring to many bygone causes of quarrel and making use of terms which were not always choice. It was not often that she lost her head in that way; but such fits overcame her from time to time, and were

(as Count Souravieff was wont to assure her) singularly unbecoming to her. There are people who look imposing when they are enraged; but she was not one of them, nor could she scold without raising her voice to a scream.

Mark waited patiently until the storm had spent itself. It does an angry woman no good to interrupt her while her breath holds out. But as soon as he could obtain a hearing he said:

"I have no doubt that all your accusations are fully justified, Olga; I will admit, if you like, that I have every defect in the world except inconstancy. And I suppose I ought not to make an exception of that; because with your present views you would probably consider it a merit."

This was his trump card. He played it, perhaps, a little too often, but it never failed to score. The result of its production on the present occasion was that he was forgiven and begged to forgive, and that he left the house with an inclination to laugh, tempered by a strong sense of humiliation.

Madame Souravieff's emotions were of a less complex nature. There was a good deal more of triumph than of shame in the face which she contemplated intently in

a hand-mirror that she caught up from the table after Mark had left her.

"I made a fool of myself," said she to her reflection; "but I don't care! He loves me still! Ah, Miss Bligh, you are younger than I am and prettier than I ever was; but I am not afraid of you!"

CHAPTER XI.

BOBBY'S GLORY

A PROUD and happy man was Sir George Dare when he unfolded his *Times* one morning and found therein an account of the spirited capture of an armed slave-dhow off the Zanzibar coast by a boat's crew belonging to H.M.S. *Cygnet*, under the command of Lieutenant Dare. The gallantry and determination displayed by that young officer were highly commended; for the dhow, it appeared, had offered a stubborn resistance and her captors had been largely outnumbered. It was added that this was not the first occasion on which Lieutenant Dare had distinguished himself in a similar manner. Moreover, it chanced by great good luck that the *Times*—being perhaps a little short of subjects—devoted a leading article that day to the question of the suppression of the slave trade, in the course of which Bobby's name

was mentioned more than once with a kindly appreciation of his deserts.

"Hah!" ejaculated Sir George, beaming round the breakfast-table; "that's the way to do it! I don't know whether you've noticed, any of you, that there have been a good many more attacks upon dhows than captures of late. What they want out there is a fellow who knows how to hang on—and, by George, they've got him! There always was a bit of the bulldog about that boy."

This triumphant crow elicited the response which was expected from the ladies of the family, led by the strong-minded Miss Jane; after which Lady Dare's voice was heard inquiring tremulously whether Bobby had emerged from the fray unhurt.

"Oh, a few scratches," answered her husband, carelessly. "'We have to deplore the death of two blue jackets, and Lieutenant Dare himself received slight wounds on the arm and leg. These, however, were not sufficiently serious to prevent him from leading on his men.' I should think not! He'd have led 'em on without an arm or a leg, if it had come to that!"

This heroic view of the matter did not satisfy

Lady Dare, who was only comforted on receiving the further assurance that her son was making rapid progress towards recovery.

"I can't see why we should go about the world interfering with people," she sighed. "Of course one is sorry for the unfortunate slaves: still it is the custom of the country, and we can't put down objectionable customs everywhere."

"We must do it where we can, my dear," rejoined Sir George; "otherwise our poor chaps would never get a chance of promotion. Talking of objectionable customs, didn't you say you wanted me to pay some visits with you this afternoon?"

It was not often that Sir George could be persuaded to pay his respects to his neighbours in person, but now he was in so excellent a humour that he could refuse nobody anything; so in the course of the afternoon he was driven to various houses and was quite sorry to find none of their inmates at home, because he would have liked just to ask them casually whether they had seen the *Times* of that day. The last name upon Lady Dare's list was that of Madame Souravieff, upon whom she had decided to call after several weeks of hesitation; but on hearing whither

she was bound, Sir George expressed his intention of deserting her.

"Upton Chetwode, eh? Oh, well, you won't want me there—no man in the house, you know. I tell you what; I'll just take a short cut across the fields and go and say how-do-you-do to poor little Cicely Bligh. You can come and pick me up when you've had enough of the Russian countess."

"For goodness' sake, George, don't leave me to face that woman alone!" protested Lady Dare. "From what Mrs. Lowndes tells me, I don't feel sure about her, and it is so much easier to avoid being drawn into intimacy when you are two against one."

But Sir George was already out of the carriage and trotting off with great alacrity; so she was obliged to tell the coachman to drive on.

This was not the first time Sir George had been at the Priory since his old friend's death, and he flattered himself, not altogether without reason, that he had been instrumental in cheering Cicely up. Sir George had a high, cackling laugh which was irresistibly infectious; so that it was not possible for Cicely or anybody else to talk to him long without showing at least outward signs of merriment,

Perhaps, however, it was not solely a benevolent wish to divert the poor girl's mind from melancholy brooding that prompted his present visit. Sympathy is required and desired in times of joy as well as in times of sorrow, and turn about is fairplay. Moreover (but this Sir George probably did not say to himself), there is a certain satisfaction in being able to show unappreciative persons what they have lost through their lack of appreciation.

When he was still some distance from the house he overtook Cicely herself, who was walking slowly homewards from the village; and this he was glad of, because he did not want to be bothered with Miss Skipwith.

"How do you do, my dear?" said he, hurrying up to join her. "All well at home? That's right. No news, I suppose?"

"None that I know of," answered Cicely; "but I am not much in the way of hearing news. If there is any, you are more likely to have heard of it than I."

"No, I can't say that I have heard anything particular. Nothing local at least. We're off to Wiesbaden soon; but there is nothing new about

that. The doctor tells me it will have to be an annual business now if I want to get through the winter without a fit of gout. Didn't happen to look at the *Times* this morning, did you?"

"I'm afraid I only looked at the first column of the advertisement sheet; I have had such a number of things to do all day. Did it contain any startling intelligence?"

"Oh, dear, no; nothing startling. It was interesting to me because it gave an account of the capture of a slave-dhow in which my boy Bob was concerned. A mere brush, of course; though there seems to have been some sharpish fighting while it lasted."

"Bobby would enjoy that," observed Cicely, smiling. "I hope he distinguished himself."

"Well, yes; the *Times* says so. Good honest paper, the *Times*, in that way, I always think. Ready to give a man credit when he does his duty, I mean. Bob was in command, you understand; so that he gets all the glory, such as it is. There's a leading article about it," concluded Sir George, modestly lowering his eyes, while the corners of his mouth turned up towards his ears, in spite of all his efforts to restrain them.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Cicely, her eyes sparkling. "I always knew that Bobby would do something splendid if only he could get the opportunity. I must get the paper and read about it at once." And she quickened her pace involuntarily.

"I'm not sure," said Sir George, fumbling in his coat-tail pockets—"possibly I may—ah, yes, I thought so. I happen to have a copy with me. I've been paying a round of visits with Lady Dare, and I thought perhaps Lowndes or somebody might like to see what they say. Here it is, if you care to look at it."

Cicely perused the sheet handed to her, and while she did so there came a quick flush into her cheeks which Sir George, who was stepping along beside her, with his hands behind his back and a fine affectation of indifference, saw very well out of the corner of his eye. There could be no doubt that Bobby had behaved very pluckily; and although the leading article was not precisely about him, it gave his name several times in capital letters for all the world to see, while full justice was incidentally rendered to his bravery.

"Oh!—and he has been wounded too, poor fellow!" exclaimed Cicely, drawing in her breath.

"Ah, I thought you would notice that little detail: his mother was almost crying about it. Bless your soul! men don't mind wounds—at all events men like Bob don't. Why I remember that fellow, when he wasn't more than twelve years old, getting bitten clean through the hand by a brute of a retriever; and if you'll believe me the young beggar only laughed. Burst out laughing—he did upon my word! Ho, ho, ho!" And off went the old gentleman into one of his own uncontrollable outbursts of mirth, which usually came upon him without much ostensible cause.

Now when Sir George was overtaken in this way you had only to look him in the face in order to send him into positive convulsions: and as, of course, he returned the look, his neighbour could hardly fail to be seized by the contagion. Thus it not unfrequently happened that even upon the Bench of Magistrates two Justices of the Peace were seen rolling about helplessly and holding their sides, to the bewilderment of lookers-on who could not imagine what the joke was.

When Sir George and Cicely had laughed until they could laugh no longer, and were feebly wiping their eyes, the former said:

"Ah, well! I shall tell Bob that you've read about his little battle. He'll be glad to hear that."

But this reminded Sir George that another piece of intelligence, which Bobby certainly would not be glad to receive, had already been despatched to the coast of Africa, and the recollection had a sobering effect upon him. By a natural association of ideas, he asked presently:

"Where's Archie?"

"I think he said he was going to walk over to Upton Chetwode," Cicely replied.

"Oh, indeed! He's a good deal at Upton Chetwode nowadays, isn't he? At least so I hear."

"Yes; I am glad to say that he has made great friends with Madame Souravieff and Mr. Chetwode. I feel very grateful to them both; for he was looking wretchedly down in the mouth—and no wonder—before they took him up."

Sir George snorted. He was not fond of gossip; but he could not help hearing it, and of late it had been whispered pretty loudly that the Russian siren, whose name had naturally been connected at first with Mark Chetwode, was growing weary of that alleged admirer and was not unwilling to substitute Archie Bligh for

him. Under the circumstances, would it not be the part of a friend (and a very disinterested friend, too, for that matter) to breathe a word of warning? So he said:

"Well, I really don't see what reason he has to look down in the mouth; it's early days for him to find that your company isn't good enough for him, my dear. Between you and me, I wouldn't let him have too long a tether. No offence, you know; but young men are apt to be mercurial, and they tell me that this Countess Souravieff is a remarkably fascinating lady."

Cicely did not look pleased.

"Madame Souravieff has been very kind to me," she answered. "I quite agree that she is fascinating. But if I didn't feel sure of Archie I certainly shouldn't attempt to tighten my hold upon him."

"Well, well! I daresay you're right," said Sir George, a little confusedly. "By the time that one gets to my age one has seen such a lot of trouble brought about by women that one is too ready to look out for it perhaps. Isn't that my old barouche coming up the drive? Lady Dare said she would come for me. She has just been paying a first call upon your friend the

Russian, so she'll be able to tell us all about the lady's fascinations."

These, however, had not perhaps been exercised upon Lady Dare, who, when interrogated, would only say that Madame Souravieff dressed beautifully.

"I don't think I much admire those magnificent tea-gowns myself," she added. "In a large house, full of people, they may be all very well, but when one is living quite alone and doesn't expect to receive any visitors, except a single young man——"

"Yes? What then?" inquired Cicely, blandly; for she had caught Sir George in the act of making a face at his wife, and it seemed desirable to show that she had no objection in the world to Archie's intimacy with her neighbour.

"Oh, nothing," answered Lady Dare, hastily; "I don't think I should do it myself, that's all. But no doubt their customs are different in St. Petersburg. Indeed, now I come to think of it, I believe I have heard that men pay afternoon calls in evening dress there—which shows that we can't judge Russians by our standards. Now, George, we really ought to be going; I had no idea it was so late."

Lady Dare spoke with more freedom as soon as she was out of Cicely's hearing.

"I am very glad that we are going away so soon," said she; "I certainly shouldn't like the girls to see much of that woman. It may be all right, but she and young Bligh went on together in a way which I must say surprised me. One would have supposed that they had been acquainted all their lives."

"I'm sure I've no objection, since Miss Cicely appears to have none," observed Sir George. "If that young fellow prefers flirting with a married woman to staying at home with the girl to whom he is engaged—why we know somebody else who has better taste. She was very much interested in hearing about Bob's success. Got quite excited over it, in fact."

Lady Dare said it was very wrong to talk in that light way about a serious matter. For her part, she would be greatly distressed if anything should occur to bring about a breach between the cousins.

"And I do hope, George, that you will not be so imprudent as to hint at the possibility of such a thing. You know how censorious people are, and how certain they would be to accuse us of wishing to make a fine match for Bobby."

Nevertheless, a smile hovered about her lips during the remainder of the drive, and if she amused herself by building certain castles in the air, there was no great harm in that. What would life be worth to any of us if we were debarred from sometimes dreaming of delightful improbabilities?

CHAPTER XII.

CLUMSINESS AND SKILL

In some far-away future time, when those who believe in the perfectibility of the human race shall be able to point to some rather more convincing grounds for the faith that is in them than they can show as yet, it is possible that men and women may cease to judge by appearances, which, as we all know, are quite as often misleading as not. With our present imperfect comprehension of one another, however, there does not seem to be very much else to judge by; and if a young man will persist in presenting himself five or six times a week at the house of a lady who is living all by herself, he must not complain of the usual deductions being drawn from his behaviour.

The usual deductions were drawn in Archie Bligh's case, and a very general shaking of heads ensued. Among the heads which were shaken most frequently and most vehemently was that of Mrs. Lowndes, who said to her husband:

"I call it nothing short of a scandal, Robert. Now I know what you are going to say; you are going to accuse me of want of charity, as you always do. Though what true charity there can be in deliberately shutting one's eyes to wrong-doing I will leave you to explain in your next sermon—if you can."

"I could very easily explain, Amelia, that it is uncharitable to keep one's eyes steadily fixed upon those who are supposed to be doing wrong, but it wouldn't be be worth while to preach a sermon upon that theme, because, as you have so often told me, my sermons fail to awaken your conscience. In this instance I suspect that the usual clearness of your vision is obscured by prejudice against Madame Souravieff, who doesn't seem to care much about talking to you."

"How strange it is, Robert, that anxious though you are to find fault with me, you invariably pitch upon faults of which nobody else would ever dream of accusing me! Whatever I may be, I am not easily prejudiced, and I can assure you that I never wished or expected Madame Souravieff to enjoy talking to me. She evidently does not enjoy talking to any one of her own sex. A man she will always think it worth her while to make a fool of—even though he may be quite

an old man and she may be obliged to affect a knowledge of theology before she can do it."

"Meaning me?" inquired the Rector, good-humouredly.

"I mean just what I say; she knows that no man can hold out against a little flattery. I can't help being rather sorry for that unfortunate young Bligh, in spite of his silliness; and yet, when I think of poor Cicely, I long to box his ears!"

Mr. Lowndes said:

"Cicely would hardly thank you for your interference, my dear. She is remarkably well able to manage her own affairs, and you may depend upon it that she knows a good deal more about Madame Souravieff and Archie than you do. You surely are not so simple as to suppose that he can go anywhere without telling her where he is going?"

Nevertheless, the Rector was not quite so free from uneasiness as he pretended to be. His wife was by no means the only person who had spoken to him upon a subject which was attracting general attention, and although he would not allow himself to doubt Archie's loyalty, he could not help a silent admission that it looked very much as though Madame Souravieff were trying to make a conquest of the young fellow.

This surmise was not altogether wide of the mark; for Madame Souravieff had in truth thought at first that something might be done in that direction. She had, however, speedily perceived that such an attempt would be a waste of time, and had contented herself with establishing a gradual ascendency over her victim, in her private relations with whom she was pleased to assume the part of an elderly but sincerely sympathetic friend. And the matter as to which she felt (and said) that he was more especially deserving of commiseration was that of his very trying position with regard to his future wife. With great delicacy and infinite precaution, she brought him to see that it was his duty to assert himself. "Authority," his uncle had once said to him, "ought to belong to the husband." He repeated this observation to Madame Souravieff; and although her own manner of life had hardly been ordered in consonance with that theory, she at once declared herself a supporter of it.

"But that is elementary!" she exclaimed; "everybody knows that no other system is practicable."

It may very well be that such is the case, and that Mr. Bligh had been quite right in the conviction which he had expressed. But then he had omitted to give effect to his conviction; and the consequence of that

omission seemed not unlikely to prove serious. It was, as Madame Souravieff had foreseen, a mere question of time; and the unavoidable crisis was precipitated by an incident which answered the purpose as well as another. The partial management of the property which Archie had assumed before his uncle died had not been taken out of his hands, and although Cicely now held the reins, the agent, the land-steward, and others had not ceased to seek interviews with him when they had reports or requests to make. It was to Archie, therefore, that the agent came one morning with an inquiry as to what was to be done about that troublesome fellow Coppard. Coppard, it appeared, had paid no rent for a very long time past. He had always begged for extension of time, and, by the late Mr. Bligh's directions, that extension had always been granted to him; but really, said the agent, limits must be fixed somewhere. His own opinion was that if the man couldn't or wouldn't pay, he ought to be turned out. The village would be well rid of him anyhow; for he was constantly leading other men into mischief.

Archie may perhaps have felt that it would be a relief to him personally if circumstances should lead to the removal of Mr. Coppard from Abbotsport; but he

was not conscious of any unworthy motive when he spoke to Cicely upon the subject and advised her in the sense advocated by the agent.

"Of course one would rather not turn people out of doors," he said; "but in this case there really seems to be no alternative."

"I will see Coppard," answered Cicely, after considering for a moment. "If he can pay anything, well and good; if not, it must stand over."

There was an authoritative decision in her tone which provoked Archie.

"You can do as you please," said he; "but I warn you that you won't be able to go on like that. It's one thing to show reasonable consideration for your tenants and quite another to let them live in your cottages rent-free. What you do for one you'll have to do for all—and then you'll find yourself in a pretty mess!"

"I believe most of the tenants pay punctually," answered Cicely. "There are a few who are very poor, and who look to a big catch of fish to bring them in what little money they can earn. My father never was hard upon them, nor shall I be."

"I am not suggesting that you should be hard upon

anybody who tries to gain an honest livelihood," returned Archie; "but Coppard doesn't. The fact is that he is a poaching, thieving, drunken vagabond."

Now Cicely had a liking for Coppard, and she had a very strong constitutional dislike to dictation. Therefore she rejoined, with a slight laugh:

"Oh, I know he isn't a friend of yours; you have never forgiven him for accusing you of sea-sickness that afternoon when we so nearly went to pieces on the bar."

"I didn't remember his having accused me of anything of the kind," replied Archie—which, indeed, was true. "My only reason for wanting to turn the man out was that I see what a bad precedent you will create if you don't. One must have rules and stick to them if one is to manage an estate upon any workable principle."

"I must do what seems to me to be right," returned Cicely, colouring a little. "I have the responsibility, and I can only use my own judgment."

"Ah, yes; there it is!" observed the young man, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I suppose you mean that my judgment is a poor thing to trust to."

"No; only that I wish you didn't insist upon taking the whole responsibility. It isn't necessary, you know."

"I can't give it up or—or share it with anybody," answered Cicely, in a voice which sounded none the less uncompromising because it trembled a little. "My father left it to me."

"Yes; but when he left it to you he didn't forget that you were engaged to be married. I doubt whether it was his intention that your husband should be a mere cypher."

For an instant Cicely looked as though she were going to make some angry retort; but she only bit her lips and reverted to the original subject of dispute.

"At all events," she said, "I won't have the Coppards disturbed."

If Archie had been a sensible man he would have said no more; but he was not a very sensible man, and he had listened to perfidious counsels, and he thought that he would be acting foolishly if he abandoned the struggle.

"I don't dispute your right to refuse me any control over your affairs," was the next observation which he judged it advisable to make, "but it does seem to me

that you make a mistake in insisting so strongly upon your rights. Other people think so too, as I happen to know."

"Oh—other people!" returned Cicely, pricking up her ears. "What other people, for instance?"

"Well, Madame Souravieff for one. No one can admire you more than she does; so that she certainly isn't an unfriendly critic. But of course she has seen a lot of the world and had a great deal of experience of one kind and another, and——"

"And notwithstanding all these advantages," interrupted Cicely, "she hasn't so much as learnt that it is rather bad taste to make criticisms upon me before you. I don't complain of her criticisms—they may be fair, and it matters very little to me whether they are or not—but I do complain of your allowing her to make me the subject of any discussion with you. I don't think that is loyal; and it almost makes me believe——"

She stopped herself just in time to avoid saying something which would have justified Archie in responding by a *tu quoque*. It was a pity that she did not go on; for had she done so, a clearance of the atmosphere would have been the probable result. As it was, Archie only saw that she was determined to

have her own way and would tolerate no approach to opposition. He said, with an aggrieved air:

"I always thought you wanted me to make a friend of Madame Souravieff. It wasn't very unnatural that I should talk to her about you, and I had no idea that you would object to it. As for her criticisms, they were innocent enough. Well, we had better drop the subject, I suppose. I'll try to interfere as little as possible for the future."

Cicely left him without making any overtures for peace. She did not at all like his tone, and in spite of his disclaimer she still thought he had been very much to blame in talking her over with another woman. The poor fellow had indeed committed every blunder that it was possible to commit. He had challenged a naturally combative temperament, he had allowed it to be seen that he was acting under outside influences, and from first to last he had been petulant instead of conciliatory. Women may frequently be coaxed and almost always coerced, but to attempt to deal with them in a weak and complaining spirit is to woo disaster.

Consequently, Cicely marched out of the house, shortly afterwards, with head erect and not an atom of repentance or compunction in her heart.

"He is not my husband yet," she was thinking. "When he is I shall of course obey him, unless he orders me to do something positively infamous, such as turning an unfortunate family out of house and home; but for the present he has no business to tell me what I ought to do—and certainly Madame Souravieff has none. I have always doubted whether I really liked that woman, and now I am sure that I don't. She is very pleasant while one is talking to her, but when one comes to think her over afterwards one gets an impression of insincerity somehow."

That was an impression which a great many people had formed of Madame Souravieff, and which was probably due to the circumstance that she had no sort of regard for literal truth. Setting that idiosyncrasy aside, she was in reality a somewhat unusually sincere person, being gifted with strong faith in several things and in a fair number of individuals, and always shaping her actions in harmony with her beliefs. She was a good deal more sincere, for example, than Mark Chetwode, who at that moment was pacing the narrow streets of Abbotsport, with slow step and a preoccupied mien. It was not Mark's

habit to frequent the Abbotsport streets, which were scarcely inviting to a pedestrian at the best of times, and were especially objectionable in sultry summer weather, but he was putting up with the rough pavement and the bad smells now because it was Wednesday, and because he had discovered that on Wednesday afternoons Cicely invariably visited the almshouse and the modest little hospital. Moreover, he had heard Madame Souravieff invite Archie to look in about tea-time.

The patience with which he strolled up and down the main thoroughfare under the inquisitive eyes of the inhabitants was at length rewarded; and if he was glad to see Miss Bligh, she was very nearly as glad to see him.

"You are the very person," was her first remark, "whom I wanted to meet."

"Indeed?" said Mark, with a slight air of surprise. "In that case I rejoice that chance should have brought me this way. Although," he added, smiling faintly, "I am afraid I must not flatter myself that it was for my own sake that you wanted to meet me."

"Well, not altogether," confessed Cicely, candidly.

"There are a few questions which I should like to ask you; but we can't talk comfortably here. Are you busy?"

"If I were I should be only too happy to neglect my business; but of course I am not. How could I be?"

"Shall we walk down to the beach, then?" suggested Cicely. "I know of a place where there is shade at this time of the day, and where we are not likely to be interrupted."

This speech was one of a kind to which Mark had never yet been able to accustom himself, despite his growing familiarity with English ways. That such an invitation could be addressed by an unmarried woman to any man was to him so strange as to be almost comical; and his pleasure in accepting it was somewhat marred by the thought that it never could have been given in that matter-of-course, unembarrassed fashion if his sentiments had even been dimly suspected. Still it was something to have been granted an excellent opportunity of making them known. When Cicely had conducted him to the sequestered cove of which she had spoken, and had seated herself upon a shelf of rock, motioning him

to do likewise, he broke off in the middle of a humorous description of Mr. Simpkins's lodgings to say:

"And your questions, Miss Bligh—I am dying with curiosity to hear what they can be."

"Are you?" she returned, laughing a little; "you don't look as if you were. But then you never do look as if you felt a shadow of curiosity about anything."

"My looks belie me," answered Mark, gravely. "I don't know that I am a very curious person, but I often feel a great deal of curiosity—about you."

Cicely allowed this observation to pass, and said, with some abruptness:

"I want to hear a little more about Madame Souravieff. I think you understand her and I am not at all sure that I do. Why is she trying to make Archie dissatisfied?"

Mark flicked pebbles across the sand with his stick and remained silent for some seconds. At length he answered with apparent reluctance:

"Madame Souravieff is an old friend of mine."

Cicely coloured. She had not only received a very direct snub, but, what was worse, she felt that she had earned it.

"I beg your pardon," said she; "I ought to have remembered that. Of course you don't like to say anything against her."

"Well, I would rather not," Mark confessed; "still I might just as well tell the truth as hold my tongue. If I could have told you that she was not trying to make your cousin dissatisfied, I should have done so—naturally." Here he paused; but as Cicely did not choose to commit herself to any further interrogatories, he resumed presently: "Madame Souravieff has a defect which is not very uncommon, nor, I suppose, very inexcusable: she likes admiration. I don't say that she would go any lengths to secure an admirer, but I think she would go a very long way. Then I believe she honestly imagines that you have as good reason to be dissatisfied as he has, and that she is doing you a service by—by leading him away. For my own part," added Mark, "I confess that I blame him more than her."

Cicely had not bargained for so outspoken a reply as that, and was sorry that she had invited it. Having done so, however, she could not reasonably take offence; so she merely observed:

"Perhaps your reading of the situation may not be altogether correct."

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "I was going to say I hope it isn't; but that would be scarcely honest. For your sake, I hope—forgive my candour—that it is."

"I don't know what you mean," Cicely declared, turning a displeased pair of eyes upon him. "Why do you say that?"

"Ah, Miss Bligh, I shall certainly offend you if I tell you."

"I wish you to tell me."

"Very well; it is easily told. I know—although you would not admit it—that you do not love the man whom you have promised to marry. The rest signifies very little. He may be unworthy of you, he may be less disinterested than he appears to be at first, and Madame Souravieff may be an unprincipled flirt. Or possibly none of these things may be so. What I am certain of is that you could never be happy as your cousin's wife, and that is why I hope I am right in my reading of a situation which at least I may claim to have studied closely. Now I have offended you, as I knew I should, and I had better say good-bye."

He rose as he spoke, and Cicely followed his example. She had an odd feeling that she ought to be more affronted than she was. When Mark looked at her in

a grave, interrogative way, she did not dismiss him, as he was apparently waiting for her to do, but only said :

" You are like everybody else in these parts ; you think that Archie is marrying me simply because I am rich. For what reason you think I am marrying him I don't know. But it doesn't much matter. Let us talk about something else."

" By all means," answered Mark, with his customary half-smile. " Aboutthe other questions which you had to ask me, for instance ? "

" No, I think not ; my curiosity is sufficiently satisfied for one day. You can go on giving me your impressions of the population of Abbotsport ; that is a subject which interests me, without being too exciting."

And while he walked back to the village with her, he did as he was requested, doing it amusingly enough. He had shot his bolt, and was satisfied that he had hit the mark. If Madame Souravieff could have overheard what he had said that afternoon she would probably have pronounced him unskilful ; but then she knew a great deal less about the peculiarities of Cicely's character than he did.

CHAPTER XIII.

COUNT SOURAVIEFF'S CORRESPONDENCE

During that summer there used to be seen, hobbling up and down the alleys at Wiesbaden, or sitting in the Cursaal Gardens while the band played in the afternoons and evenings, a little old man with a clean-shaven face, the skin of which was covered with as infinite a number of wrinkles as that of Rembrandt's mother would appear to have been. He always wore a tall hat; also a black frock-coat, which hung loosely upon him, and in the button-hole of which were sundry scraps of coloured ribbon, whereby the initiated were made aware that he was the possessor of several highly coveted decorations. This gentleman was known by dwellers in the hotel at which he had taken up his quarters to be Count Souravieff, and was reported to be fabulously wealthy. He was in truth a very rich man, though of course not so rich (because nobody ever is) as he was believed to be. He had also been in his day a some-

what distinguished one, having held offices of importance; and he was now, owing to the worries brought upon him by an eccentric wife, together with the perpetual discomfort resulting from an unruly liver and chronic gout, a most thoroughly miserable one.

Of this, indeed, he made no secret, and would confide his woes in a plaintive, querulous voice to all who could be persuaded to listen to them.

"Ah, madame," he would say (for it was chiefly to ladies that he was wont to appeal for pity), "you see in me an unfortunate condemned to purgatory before his time! For my part, I do not believe in a future state of purgatory—you are aware, perhaps, that our Church has never accepted that dogma—and it is therefore the more hard that I should be compelled to admit its existence in this world without having done anything at all to deserve it." And then, with a very little encouragement, he would proceed to relate what a terrible life he had had of it for years past with the Countess. "I live in terror, madame—positively in constant terror. I do not know what fresh scandal I may not hear of any day—I who abhor scandal! You will ask, perhaps, why I allow her to live apart from me? Ah, madame, that is because you do not know Madame

Souravieff! She is a woman who has raised the power of exasperation to a fine art. At my age and in my state of health I am no longer able to endure what I could put up with when I was younger and stronger. *Enfin!*—death comes at last to all, and one may hope that after death comes at least peace."

Ladies very generally felt sorry for this forlorn and forsaken invalid; but the sympathy of the small battalion of dependents with whom he travelled about was denied to him, because he was so cross and capricious. As, however, he paid them very well, they remained in his service and hoped that in making his will he would remember how forbearing they had been with him. Victor, his valet, had gradually become his master—a lucrative post; for it was not Madame Souravieff alone who found it advisable to replenish Victor's purse from time to time. The man, upon the whole, used his power for the general good and did not cheat those who bribed him, unless it seemed quite necessary for his own comfort and security that he should do so. For the general good it was almost always necessary to deceive Count Souravieff; but that was really no fault of his. It would never have done, for example, to let the old gentleman know who Mr. Chetwode's tenant

was; and Victor had confined himself to the statement that Madame had taken a country house in a remote part of England for the summer months. As the Count did not correspond with his wife, and did not care where she might be so long as she was out of mischief, that assertion was accepted without further inquiry.

But one meets all sorts of people at Wiesbaden, and in these days the well-to-do inhabitants of every county in England, remote or otherwise, are pretty sure to leave it at least once a year. There was, therefore, nothing extraordinary, although to some persons it may have been inconvenient, in the coincidence which brought Count Souravieff upon speaking terms with Sir George Dare. Sir George, when abroad, made it a rule to speak to everybody who appeared approachable, and even to some who did not. Amongst the latter might have been counted the peevish-looking little old man whom he noticed on two consecutive evenings sitting all alone in the garden in front of the hotel; but that, perhaps, was all the more reason for trying to cheer the melancholy stranger up. On the third day, accordingly, Sir George, who had just lighted his after-dinner cigar, plumped himself down upon an iron chair facing Count Souravieff and opened fire.

"How do these waters suit you, sir? One don't seem to get much good out of 'em at first; but I believe in the after effects. I find that by coming here every summer I can keep pretty clear of the gout for a twelvemonth. The great thing is to have faith."

"I am full of faith," replied the Count, gravely. "I have tried very nearly all the waters in Europe now, and I grow steadily worse. Yet I go on trying. It is impossible to be more faithful."

"Grow worse?—do you really?" said Sir George, much interested. "Where does it catch you, now? With me it isn't so much in the feet or hands; that I shouldn't mind; let's have a good sharp fit, and have done with it. But the nuisance is that sort of all-overishness that one gets ever so long before matters come to a climax. I always tell my doctor that I really can't see the use of him unless he can stop what he calls symptoms. Why, the symptoms are worse than the disease—what?"

Symptoms have at least one small advantage which is that they afford an agreeable subject for discussion; and especially so when you are able to discuss them with one who has experienced them all, only in a more aggravated form. On the other hand, if you are the

greater sufferer of the two, that gives you a certain prestige; and so it was that these two patients formed a high opinion of each other's intelligence and conversational capacities. The Count, who spoke excellent English, related in detail and with deep feeling the results of the various cures to which he had been persuaded to give a trial, while Sir George, listening open-mouthed, thanked his stars that, however bad he might be, he wasn't so bad as all that. Presently, at the latter's suggestion, they strolled as far as the Cursaal Gardens, where the band was playing; and then Sir George judged that the proper time had come for him to reveal his identity. He accordingly fumbled in his pocket and produced a visiting-card, which he handed to the Russian, who could do no less than return this act of courtesy.

"God bless me!" exclaimed Sir George, after holding up to the light the rather large and highly glazed bit of pasteboard which bore Count Souravieft's name; "what a very odd thing! I think it must be your wife who has recently become a neighbour of ours—a temporary neighbour, that is. She has taken Upton Chetwode, a place near us, for a few months."

"The lady of whom you speak is no doubt my wife,"

replied the Count, drawing down the corners of his mouth. "Since you are acquainted with her, it is needless to tell you that my wife occupies herself a great deal with politics, and that her political crusades are continually getting me, as well as herself, into trouble. Only the other day I was obliged to insist upon her leaving London, where she had made herself so conspicuous as to bring down upon me a very sharp rebuke from our Foreign Office."

Sir George pursed up his lips and nodded.

"Oh," said he, "that was the reason she buried herself for the summer in our quiet part of the world, then? To tell you the truth, we were puzzled to imagine what her reason could be."

"Madame Souravieff," answered that lady's husband, gravely, "has usually more than one reason for her actions, but not all of them are as good as that which I have mentioned. May I ask you to tell me once more the name of the house in which she is living?"

"Upton Chetwode. I think you know Mark Chetwode, the owner. At any rate he is a great friend of the Countess's, and he has established himself in lodgings in the village during her tenancy, in order, I suppose, to be near her."

Sir George knew that this was a rather risky thing to say; but he could not resist saying it, and watching the effect upon his companion, who indeed pulled a wry face and muttered something inaudible. But before anything more could be said on either side Lady Dare and her daughters appeared upon the scene, and an introduction followed which presently furnished the Count with an auditor of the sex which he preferred. The Dares had a good many friends in Wiesbaden, some of whom soon joined the young ladies, while Sir George was button-holed by a Conservative M.P., who had paired for the remainder of the session and had a great deal to say about the obstructive tactics of the Opposition. Thus Count Souravieff was left to walk with Lady Dare up and down the broad gravelled expanse in front of the Cursaal, which was thronged by a thousand or so of other *Curgäste*, and he lost no time in telling her of his conjugal troubles, to which she lent a willing and compassionate ear.

"It is very distressing for you, and very wrong of her," Lady Dare said, when he had concluded his recital; "still I doubt whether you have any cause for anxiety as regards Mr. Chetwode, who seems to have other designs."

She then explained at some length the position of affairs at Abbotsport, and related how Archie Bligh had apparently been seduced from his allegiance, adding with an annoyed look:

"I had a letter this morning from Mrs. Lowndes, the wife of the parish clergyman, which throws a very disagreeable light upon Mr. Chetwode's character. From what she tells me, I can't but think that he is trying to kill two birds with one stone. He probably wishes to free himself from Madame Souravieff, and is also anxious to bring about a quarrel between young Bligh and his cousin, who, as I mentioned to you just now, is a great heiress. I am afraid—I am very much afraid—that his object is to take young Bligh's place."

Lady Dare spoke with no little emotion; because it did seem to her atrocious that, if this engagement was to come to nothing, poor Bobby should derive no advantage at all from its annulment. As for Count Souravieff, he naturally did not care much what Mr. Chetwode's character or designs might be; but he was irritated by his wife's audacity in taking up her residence at Mr. Chetwode's house, and when he returned to the hotel Victor had a bad five minutes.

The valet, of course, protested his ignorance of

Madame's whereabouts, and his master told him roundly that he did not believe a word he said. Thereupon Victor rejoined with dignity that since he was no longer trusted, he would prefer to give up his situation. Now there were certain secrets connected with the Count's toilet and the treatment of his ailments which Victor alone possessed. Count Souravieff, therefore, had to do what many potentates have to do when indispensable personages tender their resignation, and eat humble pie. However, he did not deem it advisable to despatch this doubtful envoy upon a third special mission to England. He determined, instead, to depart so far from his custom as to write to his wife, and before retiring to bed he composed the following epistle:

"MADAME,

"Although I am well aware that the word discretion has no place in your dictionary, I have reason to believe that you are not usually blind to the dictates of ordinary prudence. I have therefore learnt with surprise that you have considered it prudent to defy me in what, even for you, must be called a peculiarly imprudent manner. I shall scarcely be accused of jealousy, yet I have a certain regard for the credit of the name which

you still share with me, and a certain aversion to be rendered publicly ridiculous. In becoming the tenant of Mr. Chetwode, whom you have pursued from one country to another with little care for your reputation or mine, and by persuading him to take up his residence in close proximity to you, you exceed all permissible limits, and I have to request that your tenancy shall cease forthwith. Any extra expense which this may entail I shall, as usual, be prepared to meet; but I must beg you to understand that I expect to be obeyed. In the event of non-compliance I shall see myself compelled, much against my will, to stop the monthly remittances which I have hitherto caused to be paid to you.

"Receive, Madame, the assurance of my very high consideration.

"BORIS SOURAVIEFF."

This, the Count felt, was both dignified and business-like. He was not a strong man, and he knew that he was not; still, he held the reins and the whip, which nobody could take away from him. Experience had not taught him that it is one thing to sit on the box and quite another thing to be able to drive. As for making his wife move in any other direction than that which

it pleased her to take, he had never in his life managed to accomplish so much ; but then, to be sure, he had not very often tried. He dreaded her political far more than her social indiscretions, and if she had been content to keep the latter within reasonable bounds, he would hardly have troubled himself to interfere with her ; but, as he had truly told her, he had a great dislike to being made ridiculous, and he thought that she was making him ridiculous now. Moreover, he was encouraged to be arbitrary by the somewhat unexpected readiness with which she had accepted her dismissal from London. He looked forward, therefore, to a more or less prompt recognition of his authority, and in the meantime he cultivated the Dares, from whom he learnt many interesting particulars as to Madame Souravieff's manner of life in the country.

"I am almost ashamed to say so," Lady Dare declared, in the course of one of her conversations with him, "but I really cannot help thinking she must be privy to this shameful behaviour of Mr. Chetwode's. I doubt whether he would venture to pay his addresses to Cicely without Madame Souravieff's permission."

"I am quite sure that he would not, madame," replied the Count, with a slight twinkle in the corner of his eye.

"But how very dreadful that is! It shows such—such depravity! I can understand his wanting to get rid of her——"

"So can I!" interpolated the Count.

"But I cannot understand her wanting to get rid of him—and in such a way! It is unnatural—at all events, it is very unlike a woman—to be so cynical."

"It would not be very unlike Madame Souravieff,' said that lady's husband; "she is capable of a great deal in the way of eccentricity. And it is not proved that she wishes to get rid of Mr. Chetwode. Because a man is married, that is not a reason for bidding him adieu. On the contrary, marriage sometimes affords increased opportunities for friendship."

At this Lady Dare could only throw up her hands and gasp.

"Cicely must never be made the victim of such horrible machinations!" she ejaculated with fervour.

"Let us hope that she may be preserved from them," returned the Count, smiling.

He could form a tolerably shrewd conjecture as to his wife's aims and motives; he knew that she would like Mark Chetwode to become a rich man, and he understood—what Lady Dare, who belonged to a

different race, would never have understood—that a combination of love and ambition might lead her to act as she was reported to be acting. He did not, however, mention his letter to her, because his appeal for sympathy rested upon the ground that his wife had emancipated herself from his control: added to which, he thought it might be as well to wait for a reply before admitting that he had given an order. The reply came by return of post, and a very unsatisfactory sort of reply it was:

"My dear Boris,

"It must be confessed that, for a man who hates to be ridiculous, you have an unfortunate trick of making yourself so. Why all those sonorous phrases? You know that you have only to speak the word and I will at once join you at Wiesbaden, as a submissive wife should. Be good enough to let me know whether such is your wish, for I, too, am not precisely fond of being laughed at; and everybody will begin to laugh at me when it is known that I have once more been commanded to shift my quarters at a moment's notice. If I leave Upton Chetwode, I leave England. By the way, if you had thought proper to ask me the question, I

should have told you that Mr. Chetwode (of whom you are so good as to say that you are not jealous) had let his house to me. I am afraid I cannot flatter myself that his remaining in the neighbourhood is due to any poor attractions that I can offer. Shall I let you into a secret? It is not improbable that we may hear before long of his betrothal to a lady who has large estates near his, and, if you will believe me, I am giving him all the assistance in my power.

"*Tout a vous*,

"OLGA."

The Count seized pen and paper, and promptly delivered the following counterblast. He was somewhat agitated at starting, but he cooled down as he went on:

"MADAME,

"I do not wish you to come to this place; in fact, I forbid you to do so. My state of health does not allow of my supporting the scenes with which you favour me whenever we meet. At the same time, I have to repeat my request that you will leave your present domicile. You may go to any other place in or out of England that may suit you. Permit me to observe that

your *ruse* is sufficiently transparent to those who have the honour of being acquainted with you. I can well believe that you are anxious to marry Mr. Chetwode to a lady who owns large estates, and I have no difficulty in guessing at the state of things which you think likely to result from such a marriage. What is a little droll, is your capacity for shutting your eyes to dangers which should be obvious to a woman of your age. I have sources of information which I need not specify, but which lead me to believe that in this instance you have overshot your mark. Has it really not occurred to you that Miss Bligh (am I correct in stating the lady's name?) is young and beautiful, as well as rich, and that in spite of the poet, *On ne revient jamais a ses anciennes amours?*

"Deign, Madame, to accept the assurance of my sympathy and my highest consideration.

"BORIS SOURAVIEFF."

"I think," said the Count, rubbing his hands, "that that last paragraph will enrage her. It may not be true; but she will certainly think that it is true, and she will grind her teeth."

CHAPTER XIV.

A LITTLE LOSS OF TEMPER

It is not very easy for Western people to realize the ethical standard of men of Mark Chetwode's semi-Slavonic nature. Western people object very strongly to telling direct falsehoods, but can without much difficulty reconcile themselves to a *suggestio falsi* or a *suppressio veri*. Easterns, on the other hand, hold (perhaps more logically) that the harm of a lie is in the deceit, and that, if you are going to deceive your neighbour at all, you had better do it thoroughly. Judged according to the law of his own conscience (and, after all, what is the use of attempting to fix responsibility upon any other principle?) Mark was not habitually dishonourable. It gave him great discomfort to act in what he felt to be a dishonourable way, and nothing but considerations of paramount importance ever made him do so. He differed from most Englishmen, no doubt, in very many respects, but in none more

so than in his ability to deceive others, when he gave his mind to it, and his inability to deceive himself. To play the part suggested to him by Madame Souravieff did not precisely coincide with his idea of what is becoming in a man of strict integrity, and to improve upon it by throwing dust in the eyes of Madame Souravieff herself jarred a little upon his sense of self-respect; yet, having once determined that a certain amount of dirt must be swallowed, he swallowed it without making ugly faces. If he made any false excuse for himself, it was only in so far as he still clung to the notion that the Bligh family had pilfered his land from him, and that he had a sort of moral right to get it back by any means that might offer.

He played his game with great coolness, tact, and success. His fellow-conspirator was persuaded that the whole business went against the grain with him, and constantly scolded him for neglecting to make the most of his opportunities, while over Cicely he established by degrees a sort of ascendency which was not the less dangerous to her because she was absolutely unconscious of it. In his intercourse with her he did not again use such freedom of speech as he had permitted himself that afternoon on the beach;

but indirectly he made her aware that he understood her feelings very well, and it seemed to her that he was the only person who did understand them. Archie, it was true, had been told in the plainest terms what they were; but Archie had apparently forgotten what he had been told. An unaccountable change had come over Archie, who now assumed a dictatorial tone when he did not take up an aggrieved one; and was evidently no longer satisfied with the humble position which he had at first accepted with so much eagerness and gratitude. In meditating upon it, Cicely called this change unaccountable; but of course it might be accounted for, and she had in reality, although not confessedly, adopted Mark's solution of what did not look like a very obscure enigma. If her pride was wounded, as doubtless it was, she concealed any mortification that she may have felt, and was very careful to lay no sort of restriction upon her betrothed or upon his manner of passing his time. If he wished to be released from his engagement, it was for him to take the initiative: she had no complaint to make and made none.

This may have been a very proper and dignified attitude to adopt; but naturally it widened a breach

which had already been noticed with complacency and satisfaction by everybody in Cicely's small circle, with the solitary exception of Mr. Lowndes. The Rector, for his part, did not half like the turn matters were taking, and went so far as to confide his uneasiness to Miss Skipwith, who said she really thought that when people showed themselves in their true colours, one should be thankful instead of grumbling.

"Their true colours!" echoed Mr. Lowndes impatiently. "And, pray, what do you suppose to be Archie's true colours? Haven't you been vowing and declaring all along that the estate was what he wanted? Now you seem to think that he is ready to sacrifice the estate and Cicely too for the sake of a lady who, I daresay, is as innocent of any desire to flirt with him as you are. How do you reconcile two such opposite views of the same individual?"

"I don't see anything irreconcilable about them," Miss Skipworth replied. "I think just what I have always thought about the young man; I think he is devoid of principle." And she nodded triumphantly at the Rector, as though inviting him to find a weak place in that succinct analysis if he could.

The Rector did not attempt to prove its absurdity; he only got up and shook himself and said:

"Oh, dear me, what nonsense!" And then: "A pretty mess you are going to make of it among you."

What perturbed him more than anything else was the increasing intimacy between Cicely and Mark Chetwode, which was being freely commented upon all over the parish. Even old Coppard had had the impudence to speak to him about it—Coppard, who had heard of Archie's wish to dispossess him of the cottage which he did not pay for, and who did not scruple to say:

"Furriner or no furriner, that there Mr. Chetwode is a deal more tender-hearted than some as should be his betters, being Britons and Christians by birth; and if Miss Cicely have found it out, why, so much the better, sir, in my opinion." He added, "No offence, sir," when the Rector frowned at him; but Mr. Lowndes rejoined:

"There is offence, Coppard; there is very great offence in your talking like that, and I beg you won't do it again."

Mr. Lowndes was much more afraid of Mark Chetwode than of Archie; for he knew that the latter

was tender-hearted enough, so far as Cicely was concerned, and had no belief in his alleged enslavement by the Russian lady. Only he did think it rather odd that the young man should spend so much time at Upton Chetwode. Very likely he would have thought it still more odd if he could have overheard the kind of dialogue which took place there daily between Archie and his friendly adviser. The differences which are apt to arise between engaged persons always seem absurd to outsiders, who cannot for the life of them see why such a prodigious fuss should be made about misunderstandings which a few words could set straight.

But Madame Souravieff, whatever may have been her private convictions as to the probable effect of those few words, had no notion of allowing them to be spoken, and assured Archie that the present period of his career was critical in the extreme. "You must show that you are a man," she would say, in response to his somewhat querulous lamentations. "What signifies a little passing discomfort? This is not a question of a few weeks or months, but of your whole life. It is now or never with you."

"And if it should be never?" ejaculated the young

man one day in despair. "I really don't think I so very much care. After all, the property is hers, not mine, and if she does mismanage it and make mistakes, the worst that can happen is that she will lose a few hundreds a year—which she won't miss."

"Ah, no, my friend," returned Madame Souravieff, smiling sadly, "that is not the worst that can happen, nor anything like the worst. The worst will be that she will learn to disregard you altogether—to treat you with contempt. It is an inevitable process! Don't you think that there are even some signs of it having already begun?"

Unfortunately for him he did think so: otherwise his love for Cicely and his miserable sense of alienation from her would in all probability have led him to defy far-seeing counsels. As it was, he found his sole solace in listening to these, in feebly combating them, and in dilating upon his woes by the hour; insomuch that when he went away, poor Madame Souravieff almost yawned her head off.

"*C'est assommant!*" she would explain pathetically to Mark. "Never since the world began was there such an imbecile as that young officer! Everybody who is in love is wearisome; but he! Oh, no words can

express how wearisome he is! Frankly, I sometimes doubt whether it was worth while to undertake this exhausting labour even for you."

"I am sincerely grateful," the perfidious Mark would rejoin. "And I can feel for you. Remember that I am not exactly enjoying myself all this time. I, too, have to spend some long hours and half-hours."

Such assertions pleased Madame Souravieff, and restored her gaiety to her. The curious thing was that she believed them. Or possibly it was not so very curious; because most of us know from personal experience that a great deal is believed in for no better reason than that disbelief would be too painful to be faced.

The first letter which Madame Souravieff received from her husband was simply a source of amusement to her. She replied after the manner related, having perfect confidence in the efficacy of her threat, and troubled herself no more about the matter. But the second letter was another affair, and the Count would have been much gratified if he had seen her face while she perused it. One may shut one's eyes to the truth for almost any length of time, unless some unfeeling wretch thinks fit to put it into words, but when once

that has happened, all is over. Facts are facts, whether stated or not; but the statement of them frequently makes all the difference, and there were threads of grey in Madame Souravieff's abundant dark tresses. Gazing into her hand-mirror now, it seemed to her that they had lately become much more numerous. There were lines on her forehead, too, and something like a first indication of crows' feet at the corners of her eyes. Her heart faltered and sank as she contemplated herself. Beauty had not yet deserted her, but youth had, and in certain contests youth is invariably and inevitably the victor. In a sudden access of passion she struck her forehead sharply with her clenched hand.

"Idiot!" she exclaimed. And then: "Oh, why are men like that? We are not. I should love him if he were old and grey and bald—it would make no difference. But they never love us; they only love our faces."

Madame Souravieff may have been mistaken as regards our sex at large—let us hope that she was—but she was not at all mistaken with regard to Mark Chetwode, who had ceased to love her before ever he saw Cicely Bligh. The certainty that this was so came upon her, as that kind of certainty generally does,

without proof or need of it; but if she wanted to make assurance doubly sure, proofs, or what seemed to her to be such, were shortly to be given her. For by-and-by, growing restless, she went out of doors and wandered along that footpath by which Morton Bligh had left the house on a memorable evening. And when she drew near the gate which divided Mark Chetwode's estate from that of his more wealthy neighbour, whom should she descry, standing one on either side of it, but the two persons of whom her thoughts were full.

They did not notice her, but continued their conversation, which had the appearance of being an interesting one. Mark was leaning over the gate and talking with more animation than usual; Cicely was listening to him with her eyes cast down, and a smile upon her lips. How was Madame Souravieff to know that they were engaged upon a harmless discussion as to the respective lots of the Russian and English peasantry? She joined them, with anger and dismay in her heart and a countenance expressive of pleased surprise. They did not look in the least disconcerted; but Cicely, who of late had taken to treating her Russian friend with somewhat cold politeness, ceased

to smile, and, after the interchange of a few commonplaces, observed that it was time for her to go home.

"You always run away from me now!" Madame Souravieff exclaimed, reproachfully. "Mr. Chetwode is more fortunate; when you are talking to him you are in no such hurry to find out what o'clock it is."

"Why did you say that?" Mark inquired, when Cicely had wished them both good-bye and had retired. "It was not in very good taste, was it?"

Madame Souravieff answered his question by another.

"Why have you deceived me?" she asked, fixing her eyes upon his. "Since you have fallen in love with that girl, why had you not the honesty to tell me so? Did you think that I should never find it out?"

Mark had not been quite so sanguine as that, but he had thought that the discovery might very well be deferred until such time as it should no longer be a danger to him. He did not, however, put forward that explanation of his conduct; he only remarked:

"Somebody has been suggesting absurdities to you, I suppose."

"Somebody has suggested the truth to me," she returned. "It is strange that the suggestion should be

required, and still more strange that it should have come from the Count; but that does not much signify. The only thing that signifies is that I know the truth now." She told him about the letters which she had received from her husband, growing more excited while she spoke, and finally giving way to one of those uncontrollable paroxysms of wrath which were so repellent to him.

"You will understand that I cannot remain any longer in your house," she declared in conclusion. "I shall obey the Count; I shall leave this place. Then you can marry Miss Bligh if she will have you, and you will not have to play the hypocrite every day, as you have done lately. That will be a relief to you, I should think."

He had very great difficulty in pacifying her. More than once in the course of the long disputation which ensued he was tempted to drop the mask and admit his treachery—if a change of feelings which no human being can help ought to be called by that name. But he did not trust Madame Souravieff sufficiently to run such risks. She was a powerful ally and would be a dangerous enemy: that she would remain neutral it was impossible to believe. And yet, with all the

trouble that he gave himself, he achieved no more than a partial success. Her anger, indeed, cooled down, but she only half believed asseverations to which even his skill could hardly impart a ring of sincerity.

"Nevertheless, I think I will go away," she said at last. "I have done all that I can for you; you will manage what remains as well without me as with me. There is no need to go on protesting: what has happened now—or hasn't happened yet—is simply what was sure to happen from the first. It is nobody's fault, I daresay."

Mark was far from satisfied when he left her. Resignation, as he knew, was not one of her virtues, nor was consistency among her attributes. Because she seemed to be passive now, it did not at all follow that she would not be active to-morrow, and only a very little activity on her part was required to demolish the edifice he had so laboriously built up.

"What she wants," he mused, "is something to divert her thoughts. If only those wretched people in Bulgaria would move! They are long past their time, as it is. I must remind her of that—and that it is lack of money that is keeping them back. Any way I am at her mercy, and must remain at her mercy for a long

time to come. If I were not one of the most unlucky of mortals she would have wearied of me before now; if she hasn't, it is not because I haven't given her cause, Heaven knows!"

CHAPTER XV.

A REVELATION

To be at a woman's mercy is (with all due respect and admiration for the many virtues which women possess and we do not) an undesirable position for any man to occupy. No one will deny that women are often merciful; but few even of themselves would assert that they are wont to show mercy to rivals or traitors, and it is as well not to expect of them that they should. What Mark expected of Madame Souravieff was that she would make a full revelation to Cicely of his designs and hers, and be very sorry for it afterwards. After a fashion he understood her; but only after a fashion, recognizing the enthusiasm and impulsiveness of her temperament, without allowing her credit for a certain nobility which was likely to deter her from injuring him in the manner that he feared. He thought it an ominous sign that she had not asked him to return to dinner with her. While he

disposed of the unappetizing meal which went by that name under the roof of Mr. Simpkins he pictured her sitting alone in the gloomy dining-room at Upton Chetwode and reviewing the situation. His representations had produced some effect upon her; but was there any chance of the effect being other than transitory? He could imagine that she would at first laugh at herself for having been taken in by such obvious falsehoods, then fall to brooding over her wrongs, then work herself up into another fury, and finally resolve to be avenged upon him, cost what it might. Her habit was to strike while the iron was hot: it was far from improbable that she would drive over to the Priory immediately after breakfast the next morning, in order to take a step which could never be retraced.

The more Mark reflected upon this contingency the greater became his uneasiness and his desire to avert it. It might be averted by the exercise of personal influence, but then again it might be precipitated by the same means; for of course it would be a fatal mistake to appear too anxious. He hesitated, therefore, to yield to his inclination, which was to stroll up to Upton Chetwode in the course of the evening for a cigarette and a quiet chat with his tenant. There

would be nothing out of the way in his doing what he had done so many times before; still, if she should suspect the object of his visit, he would be in a worse predicament than if he had remained away.

He had not yet made up his mind what he would do when he left his stuffy little lodgings and wandered through the steep street which led out of the village to the heights above it. It was a still, sultry night, and whether he went to Upton Chetwode or not, he felt that he could not remain within doors, haunted by the odours of Mr. Simpkins's bacon and cheese. As he slowly mounted the hill, and passed the confines of the property which was all that remained to him of his ancestral estates, the summer twilight was fading into darkness and the stars were beginning to show themselves, one by one, in a blue-black sky. He was by nature a melancholy man; his life had been spent chiefly in busy cities; he did not love the country, and the hush of the falling night oppressed him. On reaching the margin of one of his own woods he seated himself upon a felled trunk, dropped his head upon his hand and pondered over the past, the present and the future. None of the three appeared satisfactory. The best half of life was over for him and had bequeathed

him no pleasant memories; at an age when most men are supposed to be exempt from the risk of falling in love he had, for the first time, experienced a passion of such intensity that the mere idea of failure made him shudder; and when, somewhat against the grain, he forced himself to look forward, he saw difficulties and dangers without end.

"How much better it would be for me," he thought, "if I were as cold as Olga makes me out, and if I wanted nothing more now than I wanted when she and old Wingfield persuaded me to try conclusions with an unknown *traîneur de sabre!* I might have beaten the *traîneur de sabre!*—I may beat him yet, if I am not interfered with, because he isn't very hard to beat—but shall I ever obtain the only thing that I care for? Acres of land, and pockets full of money—at the best, I can hardly hope to get more than those, and they ought to satisfy my ambition. The unfortunate thing is that they don't."

This was a bad beginning; and matters looked darker still when he reflected that even the acres and the money were in serious jeopardy. He felt too depressed and unnerved to carry out his half-formed intention of facing Madame Souravieff again that

night; so he remained motionless where he was, notwithstanding the darkness and the heavy dew, until the sound of a cautious footfall in the wood behind him attracted his attention. Somebody who evidently did not wish to attract attention was approaching him, and, had he been brought up in England, he would have guessed at once what that unseen individual was about. As it was, he only supposed that small portions of his timber were being appropriated, and did not much care if they were. But after a time a thick-set, heavily built man emerged from the wood within a stone's-throw of him and stood for a moment, glancing right and left and listening. The pockets of this man's pilot coat bulged out from his person in a suspicious manner; also, to remove all doubt as to the occupation upon which he had just been engaged, there dangled from his left hand the lifeless body of a hare.

"Oho!" thought Mark; and with a sudden spring he threw himself upon the unsuspecting poacher, the collar of whose coat he gripped firmly. It was not the safest thing in the world to do; but Mark was no sufferer from timidity, and a guilty conscience, as we know, will make cowards of the most intrepid.

Mr. Coppard's conscience was not especially

sensitive; nevertheless, he did not attempt to show fight, but dropped his hare and exclaimed in a lamentable voice:

"Lord love 'ee, sir, you ain't got no call to kill a man! I'm ready to go along quite quiet and be give into custody—if so be as you've the 'eart to do it, sir."

"I really see no reason why I shouldn't give you into custody," said Mark; "you appear to have been robbing me of my game. What punishment are you liable to for such offences?"

"Three months' 'ard labour, sir—or may be double," answered Coppard, with a sigh and a sad memory of previous convictions. "Come to that, I don't know but that it might run to penal servitude for a term o' years. 'Tis cruel 'ard, sir, upon a man with a 'ungry family."

"The pains and penalties of the law," observed Mark, calmly, "are always hard in individual cases. It is a comfort to think that no individual is compelled to lay himself open to them."

"What should you do yourself, sir, if your wife and children was in want, and you couldn't get no work?"

"Really I don't know; very likely I should rob

somebody. But that is no reason for allowing myself to be robbed. In addition to which, I don't believe that your wife and children are hungry, because that is a state of things which Miss Bligh would never permit."

"There's a many things, sir," answered Coppard, solemnly, "as Miss Cicely would not permit, if she knowed of 'em, and could prevent 'em. My being sent into penal servitude for one. She won't thank you for doin' o' that there job, you may depend."

But since Mark did not take that hint, and remained obdurate in spite of a very penitent and touching appeal for pity, it seemed as though the time had come to take a step which Coppard had contemplated for some time past. He said:

"Look 'ee here, sir; I could tell you somethin' as 'ud make it well worth your while to overlook what I done to-night. 'Tis well known in Abbotsport as you're sweet upon Miss Cicely. You'll excuse me puttin' things so plain; but a man in my desp'rate plight can't afford to be over nice, you see, sir. Well, sir, you give me your word as you'll take no proceedin's in this unfortnit business, and I'll 'elp you with her in a way as'll maybe astonish you."

"You are very obliging," answered Mark; "but I think I will hear what you have to say before I commit myself to any promises."

This excessive caution grieved Mr. Coppard, who observed that he was not one to deceive those who reposed trust in him. His own disposition, he gave it to be understood, was eminently trustful; nevertheless, he should feel it due to himself to keep his lips closed in default of a distinct undertaking that he should not be haled before the magistrates.

"What I got to say to you, sir," he added, by way of incentive, "is a thing as 'ud remove young Mr. Bligh out o' your way for hever and for hever; I don't mind tellin' you so much as that."

"Oh, something to young Mr. Bligh's disadvantage, is it?" returned Mark. "Very well; say on. Probably your information will be of no value; but, on the other hand, it would not afford me any particular satisfaction to send you to prison. You may consider yourself safe from me."

The ground being thus cleared, Coppard proceeded to make his statement. He spent some time in preliminary remarks, because, being an Abbotsport man born and bred, he never did or said anything without

due deliberation, and because self-respect required of him that he should explain how it was that he came to be acting in what a superficial observer might deem an unfriendly way to "the family." Any superficial observer who should jump to such a conclusion would, it appeared, be falling into a very great mistake.

"What I seen I kep' to myself, sir, and should have continued for to keep to myself, spite of any temptation as you could ha' hoffered to me, without I'd come to feel sartain sure as that there young gentleman was no proper 'usband for our Miss Cicely. Wanted to turn me out of 'ouse and 'ome, he did—and would ha' done it, too, only Miss Cicely she worn't agoin' to be dictated to by he, bless her!"

"I can fully enter into your sentiments with regard to him," said Mark. "He evidently deserves neither pity nor sympathy. Now perhaps you will tell me about what you saw him do."

Coppard's reply was very startling and very unexpected.

"I see him commit murder, sir—that's what I seen him do. And the murdered man was Mr. Morton Bligh, as met his death by misadventure, accordin' to the verdict of the crowner's jury. Same as made

some unpleasant and uncalled-for observations about you, sir, you'll remember."

Mark's emotions were not easily stirred, but his heart began to beat fast now, and it was with a somewhat thick utterance that he said:

"This is a serious matter."

"So 'tis, sir," Coppard assented. "'Tis what you might call a 'angin' matter, though my 'ope is as it won't come to that. Anyway, what I seen I seen, and can depose to upon hoath, if required."

"You were placed upon your oath at the inquest, were you not?"

"I were, sir, and replied truthfully to all questions asked, as in dooty bound."

"Ah! I thought you were bound to tell not only the truth, but the whole truth. I am afraid you may get into trouble if you don't tell the whole truth now. Let us hear it, at all events."

"If you please, sir," answered Coppard.

His narrative, if somewhat diffuse, was circumstantial and bore the impress of veracity. It seemed that on the night of the fatal occurrence he had been, for purposes of his own, over which he passed lightly, in the vicinity of the spot where his auditor and he now were. He had

witnessed the meeting between the two cousins, and although he had been too far off to hear what passed between them, he had judged by their raised voices that something like an altercation had immediately ensued. His impression had certainly been that Mr. Morton was not sober.

"Well, sir, arter a time they seemed to get more friendly like, and Mr. Harchibald he ketches 'old o' t'other by the harm and leads him off quite quiet. 'So,' thinks I, 'you've made it up, and a good job too!' For you see, sir, 'tis mere foolishness to quarrel with a man as don't know what he's about, and a thing I would never do myself, not if the provocation was ever so. Well, sir, I didn't look no more, but turned my back upon 'em, havin' other things to 'tend to, till I 'ears a sort o' scramblin' and scufflin' and runs out from the trees just in time to see Mr. Morton roll over the cliff and Mr. Harchibald on his 'ands and knees close to the hedge. 'Twas touch and go with him, sir, you may depend, and the marvel to me is that we didn't have two deaths in the fam'ly 'stead o' one, that night. Mr. Harchibald, he seemed sort o' mazed like; and there he were, settin' on the grass, for the best part of a quarter of an hour, I should say, afore he

jumps up and runs off towards the station as fast as he can go. Dessay you may have heard, sir, as he missed the train he said he meant to travel by that night and didn't leave till after midnight. A very orkard circumstance, by my way o' lookin' at it."

"And you never said a word about all this?"

"Not me, sir! Thinks I to myself, 'This may be misfortun' or it may be intention; 'tain't for me to speak positive as to one or t'other. But this I knows for sure: I ain't agoin' to break Miss Cicely's 'eart.' Nor yet I shouldn't ha' spoke as I done to-night if I'd thought as there was any fear o' that, sir."

"Oh, you don't think there is any fear of that," said Mark, absently.

"Else I should ha' kep' my mouth shut, sir, as I tell 'ee. But *you* know better nor I do what Miss Cicely's feelin's is."

There was a rather long pause, after which Mark said:

"I should recommend you to keep your mouth shut until I call upon you to open it again—and that, most likely, will be never. I daresay you have sense enough to see that you would do yourself no good by telling this story so late in the day. There is no reason at all

why you should be believed, and there is more than one reason for looking upon your statement with suspicion. You are known to bear a grudge against the man whom you accuse, for instance."

"Upon my solemn Bible oath——" began Coppard.

"Oh, you needn't trouble about that; you have convinced me. The question for you to consider is what your unsupported evidence is worth; and in my opinion it isn't worth much, coming so long after the event. You swear that you saw certain things; young Mr. Bligh swears that you couldn't have seen them, since they never occurred; impartial people have to decide which is telling the truth, and they naturally conclude that you are a malignant slanderer. At least, that is my idea of what will happen. I am not sure whether malignant slander is as heinous an offence as killing hares; but I presume that you may be sent to prison for it."

Coppard scratched his head in perplexity.

"Then bain't you going to take advantage of this here, sir?" he asked.

"I haven't made up my mind yet what I shall do; I am only giving you reasons for silence. By your own account you wish to avoid distressing Miss Bligh if

possible, and of course that is also my wish. It is quite upon the cards that I may decide to let her remain in ignorance of the whole affair."

"As *you* please, sir," answered Coppard, with a puzzled look; "'tis for you to say what shall be done. Though I can't think," he added, presently, "as you'll allow Miss Cicely to marry her brother's murderer."

"That, however, seems to have been what you were prepared to do until you found yourself in danger of being committed for trial upon a charge of poaching. Now that you have escaped that danger you had better be thankful and hold your tongue. If ever I want your evidence I shall call upon you for it; but if I don't call upon you, I shall expect you to know no more than you said you knew when you were examined at the inquest, Do you understand?"

Coppard replied that he did, pledged himself to secrecy and went off home, taking his booty with him, since he had not been ordered to relinquish it. Mr. Chetwode, he presumed, did not want to eat his own hares, and might have been puzzled to account for his possession of them if questioned by that inquisitive fellow Simpkins. As for Mark, he sat down again and pondered for a while. It need scarcely be said that he

had no idea of allowing the formidable weapon which had been placed in his hands to rust; but there were more ways than one of striking with it, and he had to consider which of them would be the best to adopt.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SWORD FALLS

Mark was so far right in his forecast of the probable effect of solitude upon Madame Souravieff's mood, that she did in the course of the evening begin to feel incapable of passive submission to what she herself had declared to be her inevitable fate. Naturally enough she was more incensed against the innocent Cicely than against the faithless Mark. It was rather upon Cicely than upon Mark that she desired to be avenged, and of course nothing could be easier than to gratify such a desire to the full. All she had to do was to drive over to the Priory in the morning and make a more or less penitent confession of the plot upon which she had been engaged. That, it was true, would involve her in a certain amount of obloquy, and would likewise cut for ever the tie which still bound her to the man whom she loved. But what then? As a *pis aller*, one may be

content to perish, like Samson, amid the ruins which destroy one's enemies.

But these were only visions; and even while she indulged in them she knew that she would never translate them into realities. After all, she loved the man; and if nothing else can be said for her, it must be said that her love for him had always been unselfish. From the first her one wish had been that he should be rich, powerful and happy; from the first she had recognized that, as matters stood, his happiness would hardly be made compatible with her own! Was she to ruin him now because her heart was aching with an agony of jealousy for which it was still just possible that there might be no sufficient cause? That last thought might have made her stay her hand if nothing else did. Illusions die very hard, and hope, according to the ancients, never dies at all. Madame Souravieff thought she knew Mark Chetwode. Being a man, he was, like other men, capable of being fascinated by beauty; but he was even less capable than other men of remaining constant to such fascinations. Granted that this girl had made a conquest of him with her pretty face, it did not follow that she would be able to retain what she had won. "*On ne revient jamais a ses premières amours*," that

malicious old Count had written; but the assertion, if true at all, was only true of the kind of love which pretty faces can excite; it did not apply to attachments grounded upon something more permanent than physical beauty.

Madame Souravieff, it will be perceived, was somewhat hard put to it to find sources of consolation for herself; still these, such as they were, sufficed in default of better ones to restrain her from the commission of a rash act of revenge, and although, when the next morning came, she could not resist ordering the carriage and having herself driven to the Priory, it was with no hostile intentions that she set forth. Probably, if she could have fathomed her own motives, which is always a difficult thing to do, she would have discovered that curiosity held the chief place amongst them. Did Cicely Bligh possess any attractions which could be accounted other than skin deep? Was she really in love with Mark or only out of patience with her cousin? Would there be much trouble about moulding and directing her after her marriage? These were questions to which Madame Souravieff was desirous of finding some answers, and doubtless she would have succeeded in doing so before long, had she not found

Mark himself seated in the drawing-room at the Priory when she was admitted. That was a rather provoking circumstance; still it was almost compensated for by the sight of his dismayed and interrogative face, and Madame Souravieff, who understood perfectly well what he was afraid of, was put into good humour when she perceived how deeply his habitual calm had been disturbed. It gave her spirits the little fillip of which they stood in need; she felt able to be brilliant, and certainly proved herself so.

"I have called at an inadmissible hour," she began; "but I am glad to see that somebody else has taken the same liberty without the same excuse. Mr. Chetwode can't plead, as I can, that this may be his last chance of seeing you."

And when Cicely had expressed the surprise and regret which such an announcement appeared to call for, she went on:

"Oh, I don't know for certain that I am going away; my movements are almost always uncertain, I am sorry to say. But it is quite possible that I may vanish in the course of a day or two, and I didn't want to vanish without wishing you good-bye."

She did not explain herself further, but began to

talk in a very lively and amusing way about topics of general interest; insomuch that Mark could not imagine what she would be at, and Cicely, who did not like her, was compelled, not for the first time, to acknowledge the charm of her manner. And so, when Miss Skipwith came into the room, and the luncheon bell was heard, there was nothing for it but to give an invitation which was promptly accepted.

Archie joined the party in the dining-room. He looked dull and depressed, as indeed he generally did at this time, but Madame Souravieff soon made him talk. It was *apropos* of some remarks of hers about the German cavalry which were uttered for his benefit that Cicely said:

"I suppose we may at least claim to have the best cavalry in the world. I should say we had the best army all round, only one isn't allowed nowadays to assert that we surpass other nations in any single thing. I had a letter this morning from Jane Dare, who is at Wiesbaden, and who draws most unpatriotic comparisons between British and German soldiers."

"Oh, they are at Wiesbaden, then, your friends!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff, breaking into a peal of laughter. "That accounts for it! Now we know

where the Count gets his trustworthy information from. Did Mr. Chetwode tell you about my husband's letters to me? But of course he would not; he is so discreet! Personally I am indiscretion itself; besides, it is unfair to defraud one's neighbours of a joke in this melancholy world. Would you believe that Count Souravieff has given me orders to leave this place instantly? And for such a reason! I came here, it seems, in order to be near Mr. Chetwode, of whom I am supposed to be much too fond. The Count considers this scandalous; and he knows that it is true, because he has been told of it upon excellent authority. And I, who thought that Sir George and Lady Dare were such nice, innocent, old people!"

She laughed heartily once more; but nobody joined in her laughter, and only Mark looked amused. Miss Skipwith drew down the corners of her mouth and assumed an air of severity: in her opinion the joke, if it was a joke, was one of very questionable taste. Archie frowned, and Cicely, not quite knowing what she was expected to say, held her peace. Madame Souravieff's attempt to relieve a portion of the melancholy of the world would certainly have fallen very flat if Mark had not hastened to respond. He, at least, had

the advantage of knowing what he was expected to say, and he said it. Why such a candid statement of the circumstances had been made he did not know; but it was evidently intended that he should deride the suspicions of the Count—which thing he had no objection in the world to do.

"This comes of disregarding one's intuitions," he remarked, with a shrug of his shoulders. "When I took lodgings in Abbotsport I felt sure that all the good people round about would be scandalized. They were certain to say that I could not tear myself away from the society of my tenant; and the unfortunate part of it was that if they did say so they would not be very far wrong. As for Count Souravieff, he is like the absent—he is always wrong."

"And almost always absent," put in the Count's wife. "However, I am not convinced that he would be more often in the right if he were present; because he is not a very acute person. He might have been here the whole time and yet never discovered that it was not for my sake that Mr. Chetwode had taken up his abode above a grocer's shop."

Madame Souravieff glanced at her hostess as she smilingly delivered this shot, and gathered from Cicely's

face that it had found its way home. Cicely was not in the least embarrassed; but she was decidedly annoyed, and showed that she was so by changing the subject emphatically. Madame Souravieff's whole tone was displeasing to her; nor did she altogether like Mark's jocular treatment of what it would surely have been more becoming in him to resent as a gross calumny.

As soon as luncheon was over Madame Souravieff took her leave. She had hoped for a short private conversation with Miss Bligh; but it was very certain that Mark would remain where he was the whole afternoon rather than allow her that privilege, so she said that she would try to look in again before her departure.

"That is, if I do depart. Ought I to depart, do you think? Mr. Chetwode refuses to give me any advice."

"Only because I am not a disinterested adviser," put in Mark. "How can an impoverished landlord who is threatened with the loss of his tenant be disinterested?"

"Oh, if you think that I had better stand my ground, pray don't let a mistaken feeling of delicacy prevent

you from saying so," returned Madame Souravieff, with a mocking glance at him.

Then, as he did not reply, and as Cicely obstinately contemplated the carpet, she said good-bye to everybody, reminded Archie that he had promised to dine with her that evening and made a graceful exit.

Cicely, as has been said, was not best pleased either with Madame Souravieff or with Mark; and this, perhaps, may have made her feel more kindly disposed towards Archie than she had done of late.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" she asked him. "Would you like to come for a ride with me?"

It was a long time since she had made any such suggestion to him, and there was something pathetic in the eagerness with which the young fellow jumped at it.

"Of course I should," he answered. "When shall we start?"

Mark could do no less than get up and say that he must be going; nor could Cicely very well do less than offer him a mount, if he cared to accompany her and her cousin. This offer, however, he declined, upon the plea that he was not dressed for riding; so she shook

hands with him and left the room, saying that she would go and put on her habit.

As soon as she was gone, Mark asked Archie whether he was inclined to smoke a cigarette in the garden while Miss Bligh was getting ready.

"I rather want to speak to you, if you can spare me a few minutes," he added.

So poor Archie went with a light heart to hear his doom. Tradition does not say whether the suspended sword ever fell upon the neck of the startled Damocles; but if he had nerve enough to finish his dinner, the chances are that he recovered his equanimity before rising from the table. Archie Bligh had of late grown accustomed to his scarcely more enviable position. The consciousness of the dreadful secret which must always exist between him and Cicely still weighed upon him, it is true; but he had almost ceased to dread detection, and he had no foreboding of what was coming when his companion said, in a grave voice:

"I heard something last night, Bligh, which I was very sorry to hear. I thought I ought to lose no time in telling you about it."

"People are always coming to tell me about unpleasant things," remarked Archie, with a slight laugh;

"I can't make them understand that this property doesn't belong to me, and that I have no power to punish evil-doers or check abuses."

"What I was told last night did not refer to the property," answered Mark; "it referred to you. My first impulse was to keep what I had been told to myself; but I doubt whether I should serve you much by doing that, even if I could feel it to be justifiable; because my informant was a man whom you have unfortunately offended, and probably he is not at all to be relied upon. You know the old proverb: 'Murder will out!' It seems to be as true as most proverbs, and truer than some."

Archie had turned deadly white.

"What in the world are you talking about?" he managed to gasp out.

"I should think you can guess. To make a long story short, that old fisherman Coppard was an eye-witness of it all. He was in my woods—poaching, I suppose—and he saw you throw your cousin over the cliff. What more is there to be said? It would be absurd to attempt to console you or to pretend that your life, so far as this place is concerned, is not at an

end. All I can do is to advise you to escape while there is still time."

"But you are wrong!" exclaimed Archie; "what happened was not at all what you suppose. I never threw Morton over the cliff, it was he who tried to throw me over—in fact, he actually did push me over—and it was only in struggling to recover myself that I dragged him to the ground. Of course he was drunk. I don't know that he would have tried to murder me in cold blood; but he certainly did try then, and as nearly as possible succeeded. As for me, I didn't even know that he had fallen for a minute or two, and I don't know now how it occurred. That old villain Coppard may say what it suits him to say; but surely you must know that I am not a murderer!"

"I don't doubt your word for a single moment, my dear fellow," answered Mark compassionately; "but it would be no kindness to you to assert that others will not doubt it. How could you be so foolish as to run away?"

"I don't know," groaned Archie. "It was foolish, I dare say; but I thought, just as you say, that there would be people who would doubt my word, and I

couldn't bring Morton to life again, and I had no time to think things over coolly. Anyhow, I won't run away again. If I am to be tried for my life I shall tell the truth, and if my story isn't believed I shall be hanged, I suppose. Death won't be very much worse than what I have been suffering all this summer."

"There are some other considerations which will occur to you when you have had more leisure for reflection," observed Mark, after remaining silent for a few seconds. "If I can be of any assistance to you —and I think that perhaps I can—I shall be very glad. I heard Madame Souravieff say that you were dining with her to-night; won't you come in and see me afterwards? Then we can talk matters over and decide what is best to be done. Now you will have to go out for your ride, and you must try to look and speak as usual."

"That is utterly impossible!" exclaimed Archie, despairingly. "Look here, Chetwode, you must make some excuse for me to Cicely. Say anything you like; but I can't see her now. I'll turn up at your place this evening; though I don't know what you or anybody else can do for me."

He turned away as he spoke, hurried down one of the shrubberies and was soon out of sight.

Mark entered the house with a brave and preoccupied mien, which he did not discard when Cicely, in her riding-habit, met him at the foot of the staircase.

"I have come back to bring you a thousand apologies from your cousin, Miss Bligh." said he. "He remembered that he had some appointment or engagement—I didn't exactly gather what it was—and he couldn't stop to offer his excuses in person."

Cicely's eyes grew large and angry. She not unnaturally suspected that Madame Souravieff had something to do with this appointment or engagement, and she felt pretty sure that Mark suspected the same thing.

"Oh, very well," she answered: "I will tell them that we don't want the horses, then."

She knew that it would be unwise and undignified to say anything more; but Mark's serious and compassionate gaze so provoked her that she could not resist adding:

"You really need not look so sorry for me; the disappointment is not an overwhelming one."

"Was I looking sorry?" asked Mark, apparently rousing himself from a fit of abstraction. "If I was,

I suppose it was because I was thinking of him, not of you. He is very much to be pitied."

The remark was an astute one, because it could be made to apply to various future and as yet uncertain contingencies; but Cicely, of course, interpreted it as he had intended her to do.

"Do you mean because Madame Souravieff is going away?" she asked, tranquilly. "Yes, I am afraid he will miss her a good deal if she does go; but perhaps she won't. She didn't deprive us of all hope."

CHAPTER XVII.

A COMPETENT ADVISER

Archie hastened away, without noticing or caring whither he went. He passed through the shrubberies, crossed a corner of the park, and at length reached a summer-house commanding a view of Abbotsport and the bay, which had been erected in the days when summer-houses were the fashion, but which was now given over to spiders and earwigs. Here he sat down and tried to think. The first question he asked himself was whether his position was really as desperate as Mark Chetwode had made it out. Coppard, no doubt, was corruptible; Coppard would hardly have held his peace so long had he not expected to derive pecuniary advantage from silence. There was that possibility; and there was, besides, the hope that Cicely, when the truth should be revealed to her, would understand and accept it. Surely she would take the word of a gentleman rather than that of a notorious vagabond; surely,

too, she would see the absurdity of imagining that her cousin had deliberately compassed her brother's death. Nevertheless, Archie could not flatter himself that either of these alternatives was likely to save him. From the payment of blackmail he shrank, having sense enough to be aware that that would be tantamount to an admission of guilt, and would probably result in nothing better than the putting off of the evil day; while as for making a tardy confession to Cicely, he could not but perceive that his own folly had rendered such a course useless. She might accept his word, but she would not pardon his cowardice, nor would she consent to become his wife. He felt so sure of this that he dismissed the idea of confession from his mind almost immediately. What, then, remained? Nothing, that he could see, except to await the course of events passively. Even if he cared about saving his neck, it would be scarcely worth while to have recourse to flight; for suspected murderers can be arrested anywhere and everywhere in these days. Moreover, he had no great fear of being hanged. Hanging is not a dignified method of making one's exit from the world, but if he were to lose Cicely he would lose everything, and his life might as well end with his hopes.

That is the kind of thing which is often said and seldom or never meant. At Archie's age the physical clinging to life which we all have in a greater or less degree is very strong, and it is not likely that he would have surrendered himself to the police without making a dash for escape. That the very best thing he could do, under the circumstances, was to surrender himself to the police was an aspect of the case which did not present itself to him. His one longing was to retain such love as Cicely had been able to give him, and that longing seemed hopeless enough. "Your life, so far as this place is concerned, is at an end," Mark had told him. The words rang in his ears like a sentence from which there was no appeal.

He sat for a very long time where he was, and had arrived at no decision when at length he rose and wandered down towards Abbotsport. Chetwode, who had spoken of giving him assistance, might possibly be able to advise him, he thought. Chetwode was clever and cool-headed, and seemed disposed to be friendly. The lack of self-reliance which was the poor fellow's worst failing inclined him to clutch at any hand held out to him, and if he had sometimes been a little jealous of Mark, that was a petty sentiment which had been

dispelled by far more powerful emotions. At all events, it was essential that he should consult with Mark, since he was in Mark's power, and he was fully prepared to be guided by so impartial a counsellor. Remembering, however, that he would not be expected before evening, he did not proceed straight to Mr. Simpkins's, but strayed for some little distance along the beach and then, throwing himself down under an overhanging rock, apathetically watched the ebbing tide until long after sunset.

Late as he supposed it to be when he reached Mark's temporary abode, his arrival seemed early to that gentleman, who was finishing his dinner, and who greeted him with a surprised exclamation of:

"Already! You must have cut Madame Souravieff's hospitality very short. But my dear fellow, you are not dressed. Haven't you kept your engagement at all?"

"I forgot it," answered Archie; "and I shouldn't have gone if I had remembered it. I haven't been home since I saw you."

"Do you mean to say that you have had no dinner? Well, I can't offer you very tempting fare, but such as it is, it is at your service. One must eat, you know, whatever happens."

"Thank you, but I am not hungry," replied Archie, shortly.

"That has nothing to say to the question. You will have to use your brains to-night, and you cannot do that if your body is in a state of collapse. You must try to manage a mutton chop and a glass or two of champagne." And Mark got up and rang the bell.

Archie yielded, not thinking it worth while to dispute about trifles. As a matter of fact he did want food and felt better after it, though scarcely more cheerful. When he had finished, his host, who until then had refused to enter upon any discussion, said:

"Now, let us endeavour to be as sane and reasonable as we can. Have you thought at all this afternoon about what is to become of you?"

"I have been thinking about nothing else," answered Archie; "but thinking doesn't seem to mend matters much. I suppose what will become of me will be that I shall be tried for murder."

"Oh, I think not. The case, you see, stands thus: There is one witness who is prepared to swear that he saw a struggle between you and your cousin which ended in the way that we know of; he certainly couldn't swear that you provoked the struggle or that

you meant it to end in that way. The unlucky circumstance, of course, is your having concealed what occurred; but there is no help for that now. Well, it so happens that that witness is to some extent in my power. Apparently he does not love you; but he has a dog-like sort of attachment for Miss Bligh, and altogether I am inclined to think that his silence might be secured. That is, if he knew that you had left the place never to return."

"But why should that be a necessary condition?" asked Archie, eagerly.

"I am afraid he would consider it so: these half-educated people are always obstinate. You must remember that he really believes you intended to kill Morton, and his belief would hardly be shaken by your denial."

"Then why didn't he say so before?"

"Because he wouldn't do anything that might cause unhappiness to Miss Bligh. He thought at first that it would make her happy to marry you; now he has changed his mind, and thinks, rightly or wrongly, that it would not. It isn't quite a case for bribery, you see; though I don't say that a bribe would be refused."

This chimed in well enough with what Archie recol-

lected to have heard from Coppard's own lips; yet he could not think that he must submit to ruin and shipwreck because a drunken old fisherman disapproved of his marriage. "Of course," said he, "I would make it worth Coppard's while to hold his tongue. And don't you think that, if I had a talk with him, I could get him to understand that he is mistaken about Cicely?"

Mark did not reply, but shook his head, and taking his chin between his finger and thumb, looked gravely down at the carpet.

"I know what he means," Archie went on. "Cicely and I didn't agree as to his paying up the arrears of his rent, and there were one or two other points connected with the property about which we were not quite of one mind and which he may have heard of. But that isn't to say that there has been any real dispute between us. You can assure him of that, I should think, if he won't believe me."

"I fear that he wouldn't be convinced," answered Mark. "And even if he were! The truth is, my dear Bligh, that although I am very anxious to serve you to the best of my ability, I am still more anxious to spare your cousin, and it is for her sake, quite as

much as for yours, that I want you to leave Abbotsport. I am afraid you haven't yet realized that under no circumstances could you become her husband now. I tell you frankly that, if nobody else stepped in to stop your marriage, I should feel bound to do so. One can't allow any woman to marry in ignorance a man who has killed her brother; though he may have done it, as I have no doubt that you did, in mere self-defence. I am quite sure that if you were situated as I am you would look at the matter just as I do."

Unhappily this was only too true: and the faint spark of hope which had been kindled in Archie's heart died away.

"You are right," he said, in a low voice. "If I had made a clean breast of it at the time it might have been different; but it is too late now. All that I can do for her is to save her from the humiliation of ever hearing the truth. If only I could do that without running away! She will think I have deserted her."

"Yes," agreed Mark; "that is what she will think. It is best that she should think so." He added, after a moment (and probably he was quite sincere), "I never felt more sorry for any man in my life than I do for you, Bligh; but I can suggest nothing except flight to

you; there is nothing else for it. Perhaps it sounds heartless to say so; nevertheless it is true that you are young enough to begin a fresh career elsewhere."

"That will be so easy, won't it?" returned Archie, with a bitter laugh. "All one has to do is to forget everything and everybody. I suppose you mean that I had better settle in Australia under a feigned name?"

"I don't see why you should change your name. You might settle in Australia, if you thought that desirable, but when I was thinking to-day what I could do for you it struck me that you might prefer the chance of a little active service in Europe. I think I could very likely procure that chance for you."

Archie pricked up his ears.

"I wish you would!" he exclaimed. "It is just the one thing—the only thing—that I should care to live for."

"So I imagined. Well, I can't make any promise, because it is very doubtful whether war will break out this year; but I can bring you into relations with people who will be only too glad to avail themselves of your services at the first opportunity. These people are conspirators. I don't know whether you object to that."

"Why the deuce should I object?" returned Archie. "All I ask for is a pretty good hope of getting shot. I'm willing to conspire against anybody, except the Queen."

Mark smiled.

"You will be asked to conspire against the so-called Prince of Bulgaria," he said, "or at least to help in carrying out the designs of those who are conspiring against him. He is not a very interesting personage; he has no sort of business to be where he is, and I am assured that the majority of his people would be glad to be rid of him. However that may be, his dethronement would be probably followed by a Russian occupation, and then the fire would be started. If fighting is what you want, you would be likely to get plenty of it, supposing that you could be at Sofia in a quasi-military capacity at the right moment. Only you will have to swear blind obedience to your employers, otherwise they will have nothing to do with you. I myself have done the same thing; and if they call upon me I shall have to go, little as I care about such matters nowadays."

"What do you mean by blind obedience?" inquired Archie. "I suppose they won't order me to assassinate anybody, will they?"

"Upon my word I don't know," answered Mark; "I made very few inquiries when I took my oath of allegiance. I believe that one is bound to carry out any order that one may receive; but I presume that, in selecting assassins, they generally make choice of some otherwise useless person. You, as an ex-cavalry officer, would not be at all useless, and it seems unlikely that they would waste you in that manner. I wouldn't answer for them, though, and I am sure that they would have no scruple about putting an end to any person whom they wanted out of the way."

Archie was silent for a few minutes. The offer tendered to him was scarcely a seductive one, yet it bore enough of the character of a forlorn hope to fascinate him in his present desperate state.

"If I agree, should I be sent straight out to Bulgaria?" he asked, presently.

"No; I think you would have to go first to Athens, and then either to Salonica or Constantinople; but you will understand that I am not at liberty to give you any particulars until you become one of us. You would receive your instructions in London."

"Well, I'll chance it," said Archie, with a sigh. "When ought I to start?"

"If you ask me, I should recommend you to start early to-morrow morning. Not that things are ripe in the East—for I believe they are not—but because, if I were you, I wouldn't see Miss Bligh again. I don't think you could very well see her without betraying yourself, and I know that, for her sake, you wouldn't wish to do that."

"But do you mean to say that you would simply bolt, without packing up your things or saying a word to anybody, and never be heard of again?"

"No; I should pack up everything that I wanted and start by the first train, leaving a message to say that I had been called away suddenly and would write from London."

"And would you write from London?"

"Yes—a few lines. You will have to tell your cousin that she is released from her engagement, and that, for reasons which you cannot explain, you are about to quit the country. It won't be a pleasant letter to write, but you can make it a short one. The shorter the better."

Mark's quiet, uncompromising way of stating the case did not fail to impress the weaker man, who,

after that, accepted the instructions given to him without resistance or demur. He was told where he was to go and what he was to do on reaching London; he was cautioned against seeing anybody except the servants when he returned to the Priory; he was even advised as to the terms in which he should let the servants know that he would require a dog-cart to take him to the station in the morning. It all sounded very sensible and practical, and Chetwode, if not particularly sympathetic, was doubtless doing the best in his power to befriend one who could not benefit much by any friendly offices. He sat with Mark until the night was far advanced, so as to give Cicely and Miss Skipwith plenty of time to retire to bed; he heard a good deal about the state of feeling in the Danubian Principalities, and gathered that, although his companion was no enthusiastic believer in Panslavism, the adherents of that cause were numerous, and powerful enough to disturb the peace of Europe.

"At least," Mark said, in conclusion, "I can promise you that there will be a big fight some day, and all the information that I have had points to its taking place

soon. How it is to be begun I don't know; but in all probability a rising or mutiny in Bulgaria will be the first step. Now I will wish you good-bye, Bligh, and if you won't think I mean to be ironical, I will wish you good luck too. We may meet again under more exciting circumstances—who knows? But if we don't, you may at any rate trust me to keep your secret."

Archie thanked him, without any mental reservation, and went away. He was too wretched and downhearted to suspect treachery; nor did he see how Chetwode could have acted otherwise than as he had done. For his own part, a stray bullet was all that he asked of Fortune, and that modest aspiration was pretty sure to be fulfilled, he thought. No hitch occurred in the programme which had been sketched out for him. It was between twelve and one o'clock when he arrived at the Priory and gave the requisite order to a sleepy footman. During the night he packed up a few of his belongings and slept a little, and long before Cicely was stirring the next day he had taken his last farewell of her and of home.

It may be that he had capitulated too readily; but no one can give himself qualities which are foreign to

his nature. All his life long Archie had been subject to the influence of those into whose companionship he had been thrown, and it would be as absurd to blame him for taking Mark Chetwode's advice as to blame a blind man for allowing himself to be led into a ditch.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARK'S OPPORTUNITY

That Providence ever intervenes in human affairs was a doctrine which Mark Chetwode held to be a mere superstition; for he considered that all evidence and experience go to prove the contrary. Since, however, most people find it necessary to believe that their destinies are ruled by somebody or something beyond their control, he, who had at one period of his life been a great gambler, had learnt to believe firmly in runs of good and ill luck. Of the former he had hitherto had very much less than his fair share; but now the tide seemed to have turned, and it behoved him to take full advantage of it before the ebb should set in once more. On the morning after his long interview with Archie Bligh he was able to tell himself that he had not been remiss in this plain duty; nor was his self-approval disturbed by any pangs of conscience. Good luck for one man very often, if not always, implies bad

luck for another. This is to be regretted; still it is not the fault of the lucky one that the nature of things is what it is, and Mark had really done all he could to facilitate the retreat of his discomfited rival. Even had he had no personal interest in the matter, it would have been out of the question to let Archie marry the sister of the man whose death he had caused.

It now remained to deal with Madame Souravieff, who was still formidable, or at any rate might become so when she pleased. For more reasons than one Mark was now extremely anxious that she should leave the neighbourhood; but he doubted whether she would do that, and of course it would be fatal to let her guess his wishes. Upon the whole, it seemed advisable to walk up to Upton Chetwode and try to find out which way the wind blew. Accordingly, he set out as soon as he had finished his breakfast, stopping at the post-office to despatch a telegram which puzzled and vexed the young woman to whom he handed it. Why should people want to send telegrams which, read forwards or backwards or in any other way that ingenuity can suggest, form nothing but sheer nonsense? That sort of thing shows a nasty secretive disposition, and jus-

tifies the suspicion that those who resort to it are no better than they should be.

But Mark, having thus prepared a fitting reception in London for Archie, went cheerfully on his way, without any pity for baffled local curiosity, and presently whom should he meet but Mr. Coppard, going about his daily avocations, which were various, and at this time consisted in the hawking of fish upon a barrow. Coppard touched his cap when beckoned to, and said, with an air of much innocence, that he supposed Mr. Chetwode didn't happen to want a beautiful fresh turbot.

Mr. Chetwode did not happen to be in want of such a thing, but he wanted Coppard to be so good as to give him his attention for a few minutes, if he was not in a hurry.

"My time is yours, sir," replied Coppard, urbanely.

"Well," said Mark, "I won't detain you long; but I think you had better be told that young Mr. Bligh left for London this morning, and that he will probably never return. It seemed to me best to let him know what I had heard from you, and, finding that your story was substantially accurate, I was compelled to insist upon his releasing Miss Bligh from her engagement. This he has done or will do; so that the matter

may now very well be allowed to rest. Understand this, however: you will get no hush-money either from him or from me, and——"

"Sir," interrupted Coppard, drawing himself up, "I haven't asked for such, nor yet don't mean to do. If I'd ha' wanted to be bought hoff, 'twould ha' been easy for me to go to the young gentleman afore now. 'Twas for Miss Cicely's sake as I kep' quiet, and 'twas for Miss Cicely's sake as I told you what I did."

"Oh, I thought it was because you were afraid of being sent to prison. But never mind. Whatever your reasons for speaking may have been, I think I can give you quite as good a one for not speaking again—namely, that you may put yourself in a most uncomfortable predicament if you do. Do you know what an accessory after the fact is? I was not sure myself until last night, when I looked him up in a law-book and found that he is one who, having cognizance of the commission of a felony, 'receives, relieves, comforts or assists' the felon—in other words, who helps him to evade justice. And do you know, Mr. Coppard, that in murder cases accessories after the fact may be punished by penal servitude for life?"

Coppard quaked visibly. He did not know much

about the laws of his country, but such personal experience as he had had of their operation had not been reassuring.

"You wouldn't never go for to do it, sir!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't be the ruin of a man as done you no hinjury, without it was them leverets, which you'll allow as I give you information amountin' to up'ards o' their value, sir."

"Oh, *I* shall not ruin you, of course," answered Mark. "I only thought it right to caution you against ruining yourself. Good-morning."

That seemed to dispose pretty satisfactorily of Coppard; but a much less off-hand method of treatment was required for the next person whose discretion had, if possible, to be secured, and when Mark was shown into the presence of Madame Souravieff he had assumed a worried and anxious air which that lady not unnaturally misinterpreted.

"Oh, no, I haven't," said she, laughing in answer to what she imagined to be his unuttered question. "It wasn't for that purpose that I went to see Miss Bligh yesterday, and your sitting me out was quite unnecessary. It would have been unnecessary in any case; because you must surely see that if I wanted

to stab you in the back you couldn't possibly prevent me."

Mark made a slight gesture expressive of patient resignation.

"Is it," he asked, "very bad taste to remind you that I undertook this business at your suggestion and with a good deal of reluctance? I suppose you must have wanted me to succeed when there was so little probability of my succeeding, and now that success seems to be within my reach you apparently want me to fail. It is unfortunate; because I can hardly draw back with credit after going so far. Still, if you wish me to draw back, pray say so. Now, as always, I am at your orders."

"I have no orders to give you," Madame Souravieff declared; "there are certain things which cannot be ordered. I don't think I shall give you any more assistance, though. You seem quite able to stand alone now, and I confess that the plaints of the lover who is going to be jilted have become unspeakably wearisome to me. That reminds me that I kept dinner waiting nearly an hour for him last night, and that he neither appeared nor sent an excuse. Do you think that such conduct would justify me in dropping his acquaintance?"

"Perhaps it would," answered Mark; "but I doubt whether you will be troubled with him again so long as you are at Abbotsport. Last night he came, in a great state of agitation and excitement, to tell me that he had made up his mind to leave the place; and I presume that he has already gone."

"To leave the place!" echoed Madame Souravieff, opening her eyes. "Does that mean that he admits his defeat, and throws over his cousin to save himself from being thrown over? I should never have supposed that he had so much spirit in him."

"Possibly he is more despairing than spirited," said Mark; "possibly also he is more willing to throw his cousin over now than he was a short time ago. But I daresay you know more about that than I do."

The insinuation was not lost upon Madame Souravieff, nor was it altogether displeasing to her.

"Nonsense!" she returned, laughing. "He looks upon me as a middle-aged woman—and the worst of it is that he is right, because that is just what I am. Well, I congratulate you; you have nothing to do now but to step into the place which he has been so obliging as to vacate."

Mark looked doubtful.

"You think so?" said he. "I am not sure that he wouldn't have done me a greater service by remaining in his place rather longer. However, he has seen fit to take to his heels, and as he did not honour me by expressing the slightest fear of my becoming his successor, I can only assume that the succession question doesn't interest him as much as it ought. That of itself is an excellent reason for Miss Bligh's beginning to find him interesting."

"No," answered Madame Souravieff, decisively. "She will be very angry with him, but she certainly will not regret him; and after a time she will be glad that he took matters into his own hands, instead of forcing her to speak first. I had almost decided to go away to-morrow, but now I think I will wait a few days longer and see what happens."

"Oh, a few days! Nothing will happen in a few days."

"Well, if nothing happens, I might even linger a few weeks. Probably I shall be able to temporize with Boris for that length of time."

"I sincerely hope you will," answered Mark, who sincerely hoped the contrary.

It was impossible to suggest any motive for departure

to Madame Souravieff; and, that being so, he wisely took the line of imploring her not to desert him. He was an admirable actor, and although his acting did not entirely deceive her, it confirmed that forlorn hope of hers that his fancy for the English girl would pass away and leave him in what, after all, was perhaps his normal condition. Their conversation insensibly became more friendly and less circumspect; each of them grew less defiant of the other; and before their interview closed they had reached the point of discussing what was to be done with the revenues of the Bligh estates.

Meanwhile Cicely had received with no small astonishment the news of her cousin's departure and his somewhat curt message to the effect that he would write to her from London. But for his strange behaviour in absenting himself on the previous afternoon she would perhaps have believed that he had been called away upon some matter of business, and would have thought no more about it; as it was she could not avoid the conviction that Madame Souravieff was answerable for all this. Pending an explanation, she held her judgment in suspense; that is to say, that,

although highly incensed, she abstained throughout a rather long day from formulating the suspicions which were in her mind, and snubbed Miss Skipwith without mercy when that lady took the liberty of saying that Archie's conduct amounted to nothing short of an outrage. But on the following morning the post brought her a letter so extraordinary, and at the same time so unequivocal, that she had to read it over three times before she could believe the evidence of her own senses. It was in these terms (and without giving any address) that Archie had thought fit to take leave of the girl whom he loved:

"My dear Cicely,

"I don't know how to write to you, but it matters very little what I say or don't say. You won't understand, and I can never tell you, why I must give you up. But so it is. You are free from this moment. I am going to leave England, and I daresay you will never even hear of me again. The only consolation I have is that I know this will not make you nearly as miserable as it makes me. You told me from the first that you did not love me, but perhaps I hardly under-

stood what you meant at the time. Latterly I have understood better, and I have sometimes doubted whether I could have made you happy—though I should have tried. There are a great many more things that I should like to write; but I dare not write them, lest you should think that I am not in earnest about what I have written already. If you set me down as a madman or a scoundrel, it must be so—I can't help it. All I ask you to believe is that I shouldn't have taken this step if there had been any possibility of avoiding it. Good-bye, Cicely, and God bless you!

"Ever your loving cousin,

"ARCHIE BLIGH."

The poor fellow had taken a good deal of trouble over this most unfortunately worded missive. Debarred as he was from even hinting at the true cause of his flight, he had despaired of making out anything approaching to a case for himself, and had felt that the only use of his writing to Cicely at all was to convince her how irrevocable was his renunciation of her. He had thought of half a dozen improbable ways in which she might account for that renunciation, but it had not

occurred to him that she would adopt so preposterous a theory as that which any man or woman dwelling within five miles of Abbotsport could have told him that she was sure to adopt. To Cicely his letter appeared to afford absolutely conclusive proof of the soundness of that theory, and it must be confessed that it made her quite as angry as Madame Souravieff had anticipated that it would. Anger was, indeed, the only emotion, except astonishment, to which she was moved by it. She neither believed that Archie was "miserable"—that was the sort of assertion that he was bound to make under such circumstances—nor felt any pity for one who, as she supposed, had been entrapped by a designing and unscrupulous woman. To some extent he might have been a victim, but it was evident that he had not been a very unwilling one.

And now it was necessary to face the distasteful duty of announcing that she had been jilted to her relations and friends, beginning with Miss Skipwith. This, like other distasteful duties, did not gain in attractiveness by being contemplated; so that Cicely determined to take the first plunge without further delay. She

marched straight into the little morning-room, where Miss Skipwith was generally to be found, busily engaged in doing nothing, and said:

"Aunt Susan, I have come to tell you that my engagement is at an end. I have just had a letter from Archie, who says that for some time past he has doubted whether we could have been happy together; and as I myself have felt the same doubt, it is certainly better that we should part. He thinks of going abroad; so that I hope there will not be much awkwardness or discomfort about it."

Miss Skipwith was overjoyed; but at the same time she felt that it would be contrary to all tradition and propriety to let so serious a matter as the rupture of an engagement pass without some show of consternation. She therefore threw up her hands, and ejaculated:

"Oh, my dear child, how very dreadful!"

"It may be," answered Cicely, calmly, "but I doubt whether you think so, Aunt Susan. You never liked the engagement, you know, and you wished me to break it off."

"Yes, my dear, but I never expressed a wish that *he* should break it off; that is a very different thing. I

must say that his behaviour is altogether inexplicable to me. What *can* have been his motive?"

"Oh, the usual and quite sufficient one—incompatibility of temper," answered Cicely. "We have found out our mistake in time: let us be thankful for that and say no more about it."

And she refused to make any response to the questions and surmises of her aunt, who thought her rather hard and unfeeling.

The truth of the matter was that the girl was beginning to feel very sore. She had loved Archie in one sense, if not in another; she had firmly believed in his love for her; and to be rejected is agreeable to nobody. But it was impossible to open her heart to her aunt, who would never understand her, so presently she slipped out of the house, and, sitting down in a shady corner of the garden, felt miserably sad and lonely. All her life she had been more lonely than most girls; though she had scarcely been aware of the fact. While her father had lived she had had a friend who was always kind, always sympathetic and able to enter into all her joys and sorrows without saying much about them, but now he had been taken from her

and there was nobody—absolutely nobody—left. The most self-reliant of mortals must feel the need of companionship sometimes, and Cicely felt it bitterly now. The stars in their courses were fighting for Mark Chetwode, who was well enough acquainted with the weaknesses and necessities of human nature to know that his opportunity was at hand.

END OF VOL. II.

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